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Gerald M. Phillips' Devotion to Basic Communication Skills

Julia T. Wood

Most members of the communication field recognize Gerald M. Phillips as among our most prolific writers and dedicated teachers. My knowledge of Gerald Phillips goes beyond familiarity with his published work and many awards. He was, first my teacher and, later, my colleague and friend.

In April of 1995 Jerry died after a long struggle he and his wife Nancy had waged with his debilitating heart disease. Although he is no longer here to make further contributions to our field, his work endures and continues to inform our understandings of the importance of communication skills in personal, social, and professional life. In this essay I wish to pay tribute to Gerald M. Phillips and especially his commitment to basic communication skills.

I am tempted to offer a personal tribute to a man who was my mentor, a trusted colleague, and a steadfast friend; a man whom I respected and loved. His death is still too recent for me to render a wholly distanced commentary as is conventional in academic writing. Even while Jerry was alive, it was impossible for me and others who knew him well to separate the teacher and scholar from the endearing, frustrating, provocative, and always engaging person that he was. To represent fairly Jerry's commitment and contributions to basic communication skills, I must write not only about his writing and teaching, but also about the

passion and vision that was so much a part of the man behind the ideas.

In this article, I will try not to lapse into excessive sentimentality, although I will share some personal stories about Jerry. One of my goals is to highlight and honor his enduring commitment to basic communication skills; but first, and as a foundation to that, I want to remember the mind and heart and history of a man who never ran dry of ideas and never ran short of the passion to argue for them. Knowing about Jerry's background and identity will enhance insight into his views of and enthusiasm for teaching basic communication skills. I ask readers to grant me the indulgence of writing about "Jerry," not "Professor Phillips" or "Gerald M. Phillips." I knew him too long and too well to think of him or speak of him in formal terms.

THE MAN BEHIND THE WORK

I first met Gerald M. Phillips when, at the age of 23, I began my doctoral studies. In the first week of our acquaintance he gave me two pieces of advice: (1) No department and no faculty member can survive without secretaries — show them you respect what they do. (2) Basic communication skills are the heart of our discipline — the most important thing we do is to teach people how to communicate better. In the two decades since Jerry issued those dicta, I've realized the wisdom of both of them. The advice that Jerry offered me as a beginning doctoral student reflects his devotion to teaching the fundamentals of communication and his respect for individuals who do not enjoy positions of status and privilege. These loyalties are at the heart of whom Jerry was.

Even many who are familiar with Jerry's life-long commitment to basic communication skills do not realize how

his personal circumstances shaped his academic involvements. Understanding his history and some of his experiences will enrich appreciation of the reasons for and depth of his allegiance to basic communication skills.

When speaking to friends, Jerry frequently referred to himself as a "hunky Jew street kid" by which he meant that he was born into a Hungarian, Jewish family and grew up in the rough-and-tumble streets of working class Cleveland. This seemingly self-derisive way of labeling himself sheds light on the basis of Jerry's commitment to teaching basic communication skills. In the first half of this century, anti-Semitism and xenophobia were more pronounced and less constrained by laws and policies than they are today.

Jerry experienced first-hand the cruelties of discrimination based on ethnicity and class. His social location jeopardized his ability to survive, much less succeed in the America of the 1940s and 1950s. He was dismissed from more than one job because "we have met our quota for Jews," and he was refused membership in various social groups because of his ethnic and class heritage. Reflecting on his social location and the constraints it imposed, Jerry often remarked that whatever success and stature he had achieved were due in no small measure to his communication skills — ones he honed and practiced throughout his life. His ability to enter and excel in mainstream U.S. culture was earned by teaching himself to communicate with wit, incisiveness, and impact. In his teaching and writing, he sought to help others develop the communication skills that would allow them to participate in social life.

Jerry's personal experience with intemperate discrimination fueled his passion for teaching basic communication skills. He believed — and he taught his students to believe — that lack of basic communication skills relegates people to the margins of society. Conversely, he believed that

mastering basic communication skills empowered individuals to have a voice in democratic life, regardless of their race, class, sex, or other facets of identity. Although Jerry thought everyone needed education in basic communication, he was especially passionate about educating people who were not in the comfortable social mainstream and who might encounter obstacles that do not encumber those who are advantaged by their race, ethnicity, class, sex, and sexual preference.

Jerry referred to basic communication skills as "the great equalizer of opportunity in America." Many times he remarked that teaching a working class person how to communicate effectively materially altered that individual's chances in life. Jerry's passion for improving communication proficiency is evident in his many skill-based books, such as *Communication and Human Relationships* (with Wood, 1983), *Support Your Cause and Win* (1984), *Making it in any Organization* (with Goodall, 1984), *Group Discussion: Practical Guide for Participants and Leaders* (with Wood & Pedersen, 1986), and *Communicating in the Workplace* (with Kelly & Lederman, 1988). Jerry taught skills that have been long recognized in the communication field, but he also did more. He identified new skills and ways of teaching them to meet the needs of students who did not respond well to traditional pedagogy. For instance, with Jerry Zolten (1976), he developed structuring as an alternative to outlining as a method of organizing public speeches.

Jerry's unwavering conviction that basic communication competence is a survival skill informed his writing and teaching in diverse areas. Early in his career Jerry focused on teaching and writing about public speaking and group discussion (e.g., Phillips, 1966; Phillips & Brubaker, 1970; Phillips & Murray, 1969). During the middle years of his career, Jerry turned his attention toward empowering reticent individuals with basic communication skills. The reticence program he developed for teaching disturbed

communicators, now nearly 30 years old, continues to succeed with students who would otherwise fall through the cracks in the ivory tower (e.g., Phillips, 1977, 1991; Kelly, Phillips, & McKinney, 1982; Phillips, 1981). During his later years, Jerry taught and wrote about communication skills related to medical conditions (Jones & Phillips, 1988; Werman & Phillips, 1995) and computer mediated (Santoro & Phillips, 1994). Linking these different content areas was Jerry's continuous focus on fundamental communication skills and his especial devotion to individuals who were most likely to have encountered and to continue to encounter barriers because of their class, ethnicity, sex, or race.

Animating Jerry's efforts to empower individuals was his deep regard for a democratic way of life in which freedom of speech is never abridged by politics or circumstances. Reflective of this commitment is the fact that Jerry was a member of the ACLU for four decades and, as his vita states, he was denied tenure at two institutions because of this membership. For Jerry, free and effective communication was the cornerstone of personal success and a healthy society. His views are well captured in his assertion (1983) that, "The goal of teaching is the same as in Aristotle's day: to teach, impel, motivate, facilitate, or train individuals to talk as they want to or must in ways that do not jeopardize the general welfare" (p. 25).

GERALD PHILLIPS' COMMITMENT TO BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The man about whose life I have written was also a scholar whose name is familiar to many who teach basic communication courses. That is not surprising since Jerry

published many articles, chapters, and books on communication skills. For a sampling of these, see the references at the end of this article.

Spanning many content areas in communication, Jerry maintained a consistent focus on the importance of basic communication skills to personal effectiveness and, no less, to the health of a multicultural, democratic society. I will highlight four contexts of basic communication skills that commanded much of Jerry's teaching and writing energies throughout his career. Following this, I will describe how Jerry and his wife Nancy ensured that his commitment to basic communication skills would survive his physical life.

Public Speaking

"Everyone should know how to give a speech," was one of Jerry's most common pronouncements. Throughout his career, he taught and wrote about teaching of public speaking, which he regarded as among the most basic of skills for active participation in a democratic society. Whereas many academics seek to avoid teaching basic courses once they have attained some seniority, Jerry volunteered to teach the basic courses as well as to teach the teaching assistants how to teach them. He relished working with students at the introductory level for doing so engaged him in what he regarded as the arena for the most important instruction in our field — that of teaching individuals to improve their personal competence (e.g., Phillips, Kough, & Kelly, 1985).

Jerry did not emphasize frills and fripperies in his teaching of or writing about public speaking. Instead, he stressed the basics: audience analysis, organization, evidence, clarity, and credibility. His students learned to sculpt their ideas to the perspectives of listeners, to structure speeches clearly and coherently, to support them

with convincing evidence, and to present them with conviction and clarity. Most of his students did not achieve extraordinary eloquence; few of them failed to become competent; none of them left a course with him without appreciating the importance of communication.

Group Discussion

Another of Jerry's pedagogical interests was group discussion and leadership. In this area I was privileged to work with him (Wood, Phillips and Pedersen, 1986). His textbooks and classroom teaching about group communication emphasized basic communication skills. He insisted that students learn to use the standard agenda to organize group deliberations, to conduct research relevant to solving collective problems, and to think critically and participate constructively in group problem solving. Because Jerry realized that the lone individual is seldom effective, he regarded the ability to participate effectively in group discussion as essential to personal, professional, and social progress.

Reticence

Many people regard Jerry's name as synonymous with reticence because he initiated a pedagogical program specifically tailored to the needs and constraints of apprehensive speakers. The most comprehensive description of reticence pedagogy is Jerry's 1991 book, *Communication Incompetencies: A Theory of Training Oral Performance Behavior*. Jerry's interest in reticence arose from his life-long commitment to helping those who were somehow disadvantaged in society. For years the Pennsylvania State University where Jerry taught for more than 20 years required a course in basic

communication as a condition of graduation. Jerry noticed that a number of students were not graduating because they were so fearful of speaking that they couldn't face taking a basic communication course. Others also realized that some students were forgoing their degrees in preference to taking a basic communication course. Unlike others, however, Jerry did something about the problem.

With no models to guide him and with initially more skepticism than support from colleagues, Jerry developed and over the years refined what has become known as the Reticence Program, which includes not only theoretically grounded and pragmatically tested pedagogical content, but also screening and diagnostic measures to distinguish truly fearful communicators from those students who might simply wish to avoid the regular basic course. As a result of the Reticence Program students who in years past sacrificed their degrees learned how to communicate effectively not only in the classroom, but also in the "real world." The stunning success of Jerry's work with students others disregarded and dismissed led Jerry's colleague and friend, Tony Lenze (1995, np), to assert that Jerry's "greatest legacy is the continuing operation of the Reticence Program."

Computer-Mediated Communication

I suspect I am not alone in being someone who kicked and screamed and fought against communication technologies and resisted participation in them. I was computer challenged and technologically reticent, but with Jerry as a friend and colleague, I was not allowed to stay that way! When in 1985 Jerry tried to persuade me I should get a modem so that I could converse with folks on the Internet (especially with him), I tried to avoid the challenge by claiming I couldn't afford to buy a modem. Three days after I advanced that fabrication, I received in the mail a modem from Jerry

with this terse note: "No more excuses. It's time you learned the skills you need to communicate in this era." Jerry insisted that I become competent with new communication technologies, although, I confess, I continued to disappoint him with my lack of enthusiasm for ever-newer chapters in this project.

Jerry's insistence on the importance of basic skills in computer-mediated communication was not restricted to me and his other friends and colleagues (see, for example, Werman & Phillips, 1995). He recognized, long before many of us, that as teachers we have a responsibility to teach our students to use new technologies of communication. He was among the first in our field to assert that a basic communication competence in the world of today and tomorrow is computer-mediated communication. Jerry foresaw that individuals without skills in technological communication would be as disadvantaged and silenced as those without public, group and interpersonal communication skills have historically been. In this area, as in others, Jerry not only recognized the significance of skill in technological forms of communication, but he modeled ways to teach them to undergraduates. His 1994 essay, co-authored with Jerry Santoro, about which I will say more later, is an example of his ceaseless commitment to teaching basic communication skills that enable people to be effective in personal and public life.

Applied Communication

The range of topics that Jerry taught and studied, only some of which I have noted in this article, should not obscure a consistency of purpose that marked his work. Regardless of whether he was writing or teaching about public speaking, group discussion, computer-mediated

communication, or training in reticence, Jerry invariably regarded communication as an applied field. Against the tide of high-level theorizing and specialized scholarship, Jerry loudly and tirelessly championed the importance of communication as an applied field whose heart is and has always been basic skills. In 1983, for instance, he argued that "a commitment to our own tradition may be just what the discipline needs, and the competence/skill quest may be just the way to get it" (p. 343).

Jerry's undefensive defense of communication as an applied art and science was not due to his inability to engage in theoretical thought and writing. Indeed, he could (and did) dance at higher levels of theoretical abstraction than most who define themselves primarily as theorists. Jerry had read and could discuss extensively Freud (in the original), Hegel, Jung, Marx, Aristotle and Plato (their complete works), Foucault, and other major established and emergent theorists. He knew their work well, and it informed his own thinking, teaching, and scholarship.

Yet, Jerry was ever mindful of the premier social scientist Kurt Lewin's dictum that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory." For Jerry, as for me (Wood, 1995), theory is not removed from praxis. Instead, theories are always informed, tacitly or overtly, by practice and, conversely, practice is always guided, consciously or not, by theoretical assumptions. For Jerry, the bottom line was practical — some change or effect as a result of communication skill.

Consider a few examples of the pragmatic ways in which Jerry applied theory in his teaching and writing about pedagogy. During the 1970s and early 1980s he developed and supervised a novel program designed to teach reticent students to communicate competently. This was a pioneering venture in which Jerry combined his knowledge of rhetorical and psychoanalytic theories to craft a training program in which understanding of

neurosis and self-concept informed techniques for fostering the development of basic communication skills in apprehensive speakers.

In more recent years Jerry taught himself about computer technologies, or infomatics as he often called it. Unlike many of us who aim only to become competent in the software and communication techniques we need to do our work, Jerry was determined to understand theories of computer intelligence and computer operations. He was more than successful in this venture, as evident by his guest editorship of the April 1994 issue of *Communication Education*, which was devoted to uses of the National Information Infrastructure in the field of communication. Equally convincing testimony of his understanding of theories of computer technologies is his appointment as an adjunct Professor of Infomatics at the Pennsylvania State University. But, again, Jerry did not linger too long with theory qua theory. He insisted on putting theory to the service of practical ends. A good example of this is his essay titled "Computer-Mediated Communication in the Basic Communication Course," which he co-authored with Jerry Santoro for the *Basic Communication Course Annual for 1994*. The course which he and Santoro described in that chapter won one of only 101 EDUCOM Joe Wyatt Challenge Awards for successfully applying computer technology to basic instruction. Developing that course and sharing his experiences with others illustrate his dedication to teaching basic communication skills that can be applied in the context of everyday life.

A Lasting Monument to Applied Communication

Not content only to be an applied theorist himself, Jerry wanted to highlight the importance of applied communication, and he wanted to do this in a way that would survive his own life.

With his wife Nancy, Jerry founded and provided initial funding for a major SCA award to honor and reward impressive work in applied communication. The Gerald M. Phillips Award for Applied Communication was first given in 1994. As a member of the Gerald M. Phillips Award Committee for 1994 and 1995, I can testify to the quality of nominees for the award. Further, without violating the confidentiality of committee documents, I can state that no small portion of the nominees are former students of Jerry. His commitment to basic communication skills lives on in his students and in the award that provides national recognition to applied communication.

GERALD M. PHILLIPS' LEGACY TO THE FIELD

Jerry was an unusual academic — one not easily placed in conventional cubbyholes. On the one hand, he was a staunch traditionalist in his abiding commitment to basic communication skills, so often abandoned by accomplished professors. On the other hand, he was a radical pioneer who led the field forward to embrace and teach about new communication competencies that our students (and we) need if we are to be effective in an era dominated by information and technology. He was a man who understood the critical importance of communication skills for effective living, and he was a teacher who savored empowering students through instructing them in those skills.

Jerry's continuing and substantial contributions to the basic communication course reflect his impressive intellect. No less, they reflect his equally extraordinary heart and passionate commitment to empowering those who are not born into privilege. In his teaching of basic skills Jerry was steadfastly rigorous, often stern, and never willing to compromise standards. His rigor, however, was never mean spirited nor used to belittle students; instead, it sprang from a devotion to his students and from his knowledge that they needed to become proficient in basic communication skills in order to be successful.

Now, only a few months after Jerry's death, I still find it difficult to endure the personal or professional loss. He was a dedicated teacher, a tireless advocate of basic communication skills, a loving husband, father, and grandfather, and an uncommonly loyal friend. It would be easier to accept Jerry's death if during his life he had given less to our field and to those who had the privilege of knowing and working with

him. Yet, it was not Jerry's way to give less than he was capable of giving, and he was capable of giving very much, as his record demonstrates.

The field of communication was greatly enriched by Jerry Phillip's vigorous participation in it. His lifetime of contributions make the discipline more vibrant and consequential than it would have been had he not been among us. Jerry's absence now reminds us of his strong presence and the difference it has made and will continue to make.

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