Theory and Pedagogy in the Basic Course: A Summary From Spano and Hickson

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I, too, have been pleased about the exchange of insights relative to the practical approach to teaching the basic course, as suggested by Spano (1996). While I agree with much of what Spano wrote, I am still concerned about the nature and status of some of the “theory” that has been developed and that is being developed in the discipline. To understand my overall view, however, one must review information about the nature of theory from meta-theoriticians, or critics of theory. And I think that we will find that there are some similarities between a practical view of theory and a scientific view of theory.

**SCIENCE AND PRACTICE**

Quintilian argued that oratory is an art. “[A]n art is a power working its effects by a course, that is by method, no man will doubt that there is a certain course and method in oratory; or whether that definition, approved by almost everybody, that an art consists of perceptions consenting and cooperating to some end useful to life, be adopted by all of us, we have already shown that everything to which this definition is to be found in oratory (Bizzell & Hertzberg, p. 329). Thus, from Quintilian’s perspective, oratory was seen as a *practical art*.

From a quite different perspective, discussing the “social sciences” and sociology in particular, Mazur (1968) indicated that *science* has four characteristics: (1) it is em-
pirical (based on observation); (2) it is theoretical (can be summarized into propositions); (3) it is cumulative; and (4) it is nonethical. In a sense, these are element of “pure” science; that is, the observations are “clean” in that they are separate and apart from the motivations of the observer. Lastly, Mazur suggests that science occurs only when the “people who know the theories know more about the real world than the people who don’t know theories” (p. 16). From this standpoint, certainly Spano (1996) is right in suggesting that many of the positivistic studies, from the early 1960s to the present, only tell us what Aristotle said earlier, without the use of statistics.

These two positions, though, of Quintilian and Mazur, are quite disparate views—or so it would appear. However, they also have different goals. To Mazur, science is not intuitive. One would assume, however, that Mazur believes that science is concerned with some useful end in life. The term, “useful,” when used by Quintilian, could be interpreted as “practical.” Thus, both science and art, according to Mazur and Quintilian, serve some practical purpose.

When I think of seemingly impractical consequences of science, I remember my days at land-grant institutions, where they taught “weed science.” I often thought, why? What good do weeds do us? One day, meeting on a graduate student’s thesis committee in “Wildlife Management,” I discovered that what we call weeds, some animals call food. And some of those animals we call food, during their last days on earth. So, even weed science serves some practical purpose.

In this context, we might consider the notion: “Science makes life possible; the arts make life worthwhile.” It is in this context that I must put in a word for the sciences. Certainly medical and health communication make life both possible and worthwhile. Obviously the debate over whether the discipline of speech communication is a science or an art or even whether it should be an art or a sci-
ience is not going to be resolved by Professor Spano nor by me. I will reiterate, however, my contention that our discipline, in the last half century, has been and continues to be a search for the answer to that question, perhaps in the contexts of several other philosophical questions.

I do not believe that any answer in these pages will change the nature of communication in the discipline, but let us take just a few more words to deal with the concepts of a practical art and a practical science. One of the differences, historically at least, has been that an art requires a certain predisposition—a talent if you will. Presumably, one who takes this approach believes that some people are “born with a knack” to communicate better than others. While I realize that some instructors would discount this notion, I believe that most of us who have taught public speaking for very long know that some students start out ahead of others. In large measure this is because some students are more “extroverted” than others (or perhaps they have the extroversion gene). It isn’t that we believe that these individuals are better at researching a speech; what we mean is that they feel more comfortable talking before a large number of people. On the other hand, the notion of science has been viewed as some kind of democratic notion in that anyone can do science through knowledge and practice. Certainly a theory like this makes education make more sense. That is, you can only be a physician if you go to college, read, and study, and practice. On the other hand, one who has the talent to sell, for example, can do as well as high school drop-out since selling is a “knack.”

In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to provide my thinking and analysis of the three points made by Spano. I am first intrigued, though, by how he arrived at his current thinking.
TEACHING AND RESEARCH: CONFLICTING OR COMPLEMENTARY?

Part of the differences in the graduate educations of Professor Spano and me appear to be related to the fact that much of mine was under the “old school.” I was never taught that research was more important than teaching. I was taught only that research increased one’s credibility in the classroom, if the research were relevant. I was also allowed to undertake qualitative research, which certainly was not as popular then as now. I do believe, unfortunately, that too many graduate students are given the same or similar advice to that given Spano. I am pleased that his “epiphany” was realized. And I think it is something that should be taught all graduate students. Teaching and research certainly do not have to be conflicting. Here I mean conflicting in a time sense. As an administrator, I have seen too many cases of new professors “getting off on the wrong foot” trying to uphold their service obligations, teach classes, and undertake research that often appeared to be on another planet. The time management was atrocious because the faculty member could not focus and saw no relationship between what she or he was doing and what he or she was interested in. In any case, we agree that one should undertake research that is related to teaching. If one is teaching the “wrong” course or undertaking the “wrong” research, this should be discussed with the appropriate persons.

Philosophically, I do not believe that communication is some “pie in the sky” discipline. I believe that we have often gotten off track with some multiple linear regression models of job satisfaction and communication. As well I think we have gotten off track with some postmodern analyses of the communication culture of some hypothetical corporation. I do not believe that quantitative analysts have a monopoly on abstraction, incoherence, irrelevance,
dogmatism, or simple foolishness, merely to get an article published. I do believe that the best in the business undertake practical theory and research and that they write it in a way that those who need it can understand it.

TEACHING AND COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

We have a purpose in the classroom. The purpose is to improve students’ communication. Teaching is probably the most important of the communication practices that we, as teachers, undertake. Teaching is a form of applied communication theory. Using Spano’s first example, it is important to analyze the audience in the classroom. Many so-called teachers tend to forget this. Instead, they teach their almost-soiled class notes from their Ph.D. programs to undergraduates so that they can use their time to write some esoteric bit of tripe for the most prestigious journal in the discipline (whatever they think it is).

In this context, it seems that one of the most important elements discussed about Pam is that she views the classroom as a place for transaction—for sharing. The good teacher and the good theorist certainly have one commonality: they know how to listen. Here I use listening in the generic sense of observations of verbal and nonverbal messages. Perhaps some of the best insights about communication have been formulated by Erving Goffman, a sociologist, who was a great listener of humankind—and perhaps, a practical theorist. I would agree, too, that Goffman never placed his “theories” into a series of axioms, although I think someone could probably take his work and do just that. I tend to think of the axiomatic approach more along the lines of a linear organizational pattern. Perhaps it is not reflective of the communication process, and perhaps this is part of what bothers Spano. Most people do not talk that way; most people do not think that way. Instead we
tend to think and talk in instantaneous, experientially-connected units.

For this reason, I have often wondered how a communication teacher can discuss communication as a process of interaction and/or transaction and teach completely using the one-way lecture. That same person might try to avoid students’ asking questions because it may take too much time, get them “off track,” and the like. But the lecture is based on the experiences of the teacher, not the student. There is often an attitude of “you must let me explain to you the difference between interaction and transaction; you have nothing to offer; and I am a busy person who must get through 15 chapters before the final examination.” Practice what I say, not what I do?

**CLARIFYING ASSUMPTIONS**

Perhaps the core of our argument previously (Spano, 1996; Hickson, 1996), at least to me, was what are we talking about relative to “trial and error” or “starting from scratch” for the students in the basic course. In the latest work, Spano has agreed that he is discussing “something resembling trial and error” but not “starting from scratch.” In a strange loopy kind of way, this semantic difference may be critical to this whole discussion. Perhaps, we are talking about trial and trial, remembering not to re-make errors (at least not on the part of the instructor). If an approach worked, we tend to use it again. If it did not work, we do not use it again. Of course, just because it worked once does not necessarily mean that it will work a second time. It appears that Professor Spano and I can agree that most theoretical principles in communication may resemble being law-like, but are, in fact, contextual. And we may agree that theory and practice should be intermingled, under the rubric of “testing” theoretical propositions through practical, contextual exercises. We probably also agree that...
a practical approach would mean that the propositions themselves are based on experience, not merely quantified measurements of abstractions. Let me provide an example from my own teaching this quarter, albeit from an advanced theory class.

In this course we reviewed the literature, from Aristotle to the 1990s, on the concept of ethos or credibility. Students provided oral reports. The vast majority of these studies have indicated that credibility is a multi-factor phenomenon (trustworthiness and competence; character, intelligence, and good will). Unfortunately, these terms become somewhat meaningless when applied to the real world of practical rhetoric. Therefore, each member of the class was required to write a paper comparing and contrasting the credibility of two, randomly selected roles that people play (mostly occupational).

For example, how does the credibility of a rabbi compare with that of a professional gambler; a fruit picker and a college professor; a prostitute and a commercial airline pilot? What we found, through this experiential exercise, is that these generic, propositional conclusions applied generally among the conservative, legal, middle-class occupations, but they did not “fit” well with some of the others.

The entire class was also based on bio-social theory, in which we were looking at those “universals” that I mentioned in the previous article (Hickson, 1996) that humans share with other animals. But what we found here was that “context binding” appears to be a unique human trait. In a sense, we can say that context-binding is a humanistic notion, placing it favorably in the pragmatic area (James, pp. 105-118). Thus, another assumption upon which Professor Spano and I may agree is that humans are context-bound animals. If that assumption can be put firmly in place, it means that we are constantly searching for answers as Spano says “work[ing] the dialectical tension between stability and change.” The propositions, the univer-
sals, provide the continuity, and practice provides the change, realizing that the continuity itself (the stability) is subject to the change.

**RHETORIC AND COMMUNICATION IN THE BASIC COURSE**

If nothing else, I hope that these four essays stimulate some new thinking about the basic course and its relationship to communication and rhetoric. I have contended elsewhere that communication and rhetoric are not the same. I have used as an example, the playing of tennis, in which the communicator tries to keep the volley going and the rhetor attempts to “win” each point as quickly as possible. Rhetoric may be fundamentally a selfish game; communication is altruistic. I think that our first two essays were rhetorical. I believe the last two are communicative. We have tried to interpret, understand, seek elucidation in these second attempts. In doing so, I hope that we have provided some thinking food for ourselves and others.

**REFERENCES**


