



My Mother, My Sweater: An Aesthetics of Action Perspective for Teaching Communication

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Abstract. I describe a model of communication that is based in an action science / action inquiry and organizational aesthetics perspective that I use for teaching undergraduates in place of the more traditional “conduit” model. The model focuses on communication as interpretation of speech acts based on frames, context and aesthetics.

Keywords: organizational aesthetics, action science, action enquiry, communication, teaching, speech acts, ladder of inference.

1. Introduction

My research is focused on organizational aesthetics (e.g. Taylor, 2000, 2002, 2003; Taylor, Fisher, & Dufresne, 2002) and reflective practice (e.g. Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001; Taylor, 2004) in the action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) and action inquiry (Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2001; Torbert, 1991) traditions. I try to bring these two perspectives into my teaching of an undergraduate organizational behavior class. In this article, I describe my attempt to do that in how I teach communication. I do this to show how both an action perspective and an aesthetics perspective can inform the teaching of organizational behavior, with the hopes that there may be other teachers of organizational behavior who would like to include these perspectives.

Organizational aesthetics is a relatively new area of research that has emerged in the last decade (e.g. Ebers, 1985; Ramirez, 1991; Strati, 1990, 1992). At its heart is a concern with ways of knowing and acting that are based in the senses and expressed in aesthetic forms (Strati, 1999), which is in contrast to intellectual knowing expressed in discursive symbol systems which have a one-to-one signifier-signified semiotic (Ramirez, 1996). That is to say, as we hear, taste, smell, see, and touch, we experience a felt meaning (Courtney, 1995). This felt meaning can include emotional, intellectual, perceptual, and communicative dimensions at the same time (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). However, it is not simply the sum of these parts (Fine, 1984; Ramirez, 1991; Strati, 1992), it is an abductive (Peirce, 1957), holistic, feeling – a complete, unified understanding. This felt meaning is most directly expressed in an aesthetic form