



# 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

such as dance, sculpture, painting, theater, poetry, etc, although it may not be expressed at all (Taylor, 2002). Gagliardi (1996) tells us that this “aesthetic experience is *the basis* of other experiences and forms of cognition which constitute the usual object of organizational studies (p. 566, italics in original).”

Organizational aesthetics has taken many directions including the study of organizational artifacts (Strati, 1992, 1996), the study of aesthetic industries (Fine, 1992), the use of aesthetics as a critical method (Chua & Degeling, 1993), the study of particular topics, such as ethics (Brady, 1986) and leadership (Duke, 1986) from an aesthetic perspective, and the study of a particular aesthetic (Guillen, 1997). Organizational aesthetics now regularly appears in edited volumes on organizations (e.g. Dean, Ottensmeyer, & Ramirez, 1997; Gagliardi, 1996) and recently Linstead and Hopfl (2000) and Carr and Hancock (2003) have produced edited volumes on organizational aesthetics. My own research is aimed at creating an aesthetics of organizational action and attempts to bring together organizational aesthetics and an action perspective.

By an action perspective, I mean that I am interested in developing the sort of reflective practice in which we become aware of and responsible for our own behavioral hypocrisy (Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000), that is the gap between what we say and what we do. There are many ways of bringing an action perspective into a classroom (Argyris et al., 1985; Friedman & Lipshitz, 1992; Mazen, 2000; Torbert, 1991). I find that an important aspect of teaching from an action perspective is using the tools and techniques (e.g. Rudolph et al., 2001) that are available. One of the most useful tools is the ladder of inference (Argyris et al., 1985; Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994), which allows us to slow down the inferential process and start to look at why we make the inferences we do. By explicitly looking at the frames behind particular inferences we can start to see the gap between what we say and what we do.

A focus on action is important to me in a variety of ways. The first is in contrast to static views of organizations. That is to say, in Weick’s (1979) terms, we must look at organizing rather organizations, we must think in terms of verbs rather than nouns. A focus on action recognizes that our world is a dynamic, flowing, changing, never-the-same-from-one-moment-to-the-next thing. A focus on action is also a focus on doing in contrast to saying. From an early age we become quite skilled at seeing what others do and paying more attention to that than to what they say. How many parents have learned the futility of the phrase “do what I say, not what I do,” for it is the doing from which the child learns and copies, not the saying.

But to be about action is not simply a case of focusing on action as opposed to focusing on something else. It is to be concerned with *producing* effective action (Argyris et al., 1985). It is to be concerned with not just studying “the walk” rather than “the talk”, but being able to produce “the walk”. And furthermore, it is not just concerned with any action, but with action that promotes human flourishing and participation and democracy (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Put over-simply, action is important because it is through action that we will make the world a better place.

## **2. Teaching Communication**

I use a simple story when I teach communication, which I shall use here to illustrate my approach. I'm twelve years old. It is a dreary, Ohio, winter evening and we are gathered in the family room watching television. My mother says, "it feels a little cold in here." As a twelve-year-old boy, I instinctively hear "the message" that has been delivered. My sister, brother and father hear the same words. They look to me because we have all "decoded" the message the same way. I put on a sweater. I put on a sweater because I, as well as everyone else in the room, understood that my mother's utterance was a request for me to put on a sweater. What I have heard and acted on is the speech act (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), the action that my mother was taking with her words, her request for me to put on a sweater.

I do not teach the classic "conduit" model of communication where the sender encodes a message which the receiver decodes. The "conduit" model has long been criticized for limiting our understanding of communication and creating more problems than it solves (Axley, 1984; Taylor, 1995). The "conduit" model is not representative of most current organizational research (Clair, 1999; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1999) and yet it is still taught in countless organizational behavior and communications textbooks (e.g. Gordon, 1999; Robbins, 2001) and classrooms (see Jackson & Carter, 2000 for an exception). In terms of the "conduit" model of communication, my mother encoded her request for me to put on a sweater into the utterance "it feels a little cold in here," which I, and everyone else in the room decoded as a request for me to put on a sweater. Although the decoding of "it feels a little cold in here" to mean, "Steve, please put on a sweater" may sound remarkable, my family are not cryptologists, nor is our communication unusual.

The classic conduit model of communication focuses on transmission of the message, leaving the sender and receiver in the background (Putnam et al., 1999). Communications problems are thought of in terms of noise and barriers to transmission. Implicit in this model is a mechanical perfectibility of communication. If only we could eliminate all the noise and perfect our encoding and decoding routines then we could perfect our communication and be absolutely clear. I imagine something like the clarity of digital music and video – someone transmits a crystal clear message and the receiver understands it perfectly. It is the image of language as a perfect discursive symbol system. There is no error, no need for interpretation, no misunderstanding. And even though, this perfection is never explicitly suggested – indeed it may even be

explicitly stated to be unattainable – it remains as the logical conclusion and goal of the model.

Teaching from an action perspective means being concerned with actionable knowledge. If I use the conduit model to analyze my mother's utterance, I see a complex and confusing encoding of the message, a request to put on a sweater, into the utterance, "it feels a little cold in here." I am led to think about how to make the message clearer, how to perfect it. The obvious solution is that my mother should have just said, "Steve, please put on a sweater." Certainly that would have been clearer, the speech act would have been explicit and the communication would have perhaps been more efficient. But that is not how we tend to speak (at least not in my family) and as I look back on it I am glad my mother said, "it feels a little cold in here." "It feels a little cold in here" has a sense of the poetic, the subtle, the delicate, the artful in it. It also requires the connection that we had as a family to be able to understand it. From an aesthetic perspective, I like that about language and I don't want to change that, even if I could.

The problem with the conduit model, then lies in the idea of the possibility of language as a discursive symbol system in which there is a "one-to-one signifier-signified semiotic" (Ramirez, 1996). Language at its best (i.e. poetry or literature) is a presentational symbol system where the meaning is gleaned from the whole, where that whole does not equal the sum of the parts and there is not a one-to-one signifier-signified relationship. It is language at its worst, language stripped of all art, that is purely discursive, that can be "perfected" to eliminate the noise. It is this vision of language at its worst that is the goal of the conduit model of communication. If instead we take an aesthetic perspective and embrace the poetics, the interpretation, the idea of language as a presentational symbol system, we must use a different model of dyadic communication. Working from action and aesthetics perspectives, I next develop the alternative model that I teach.

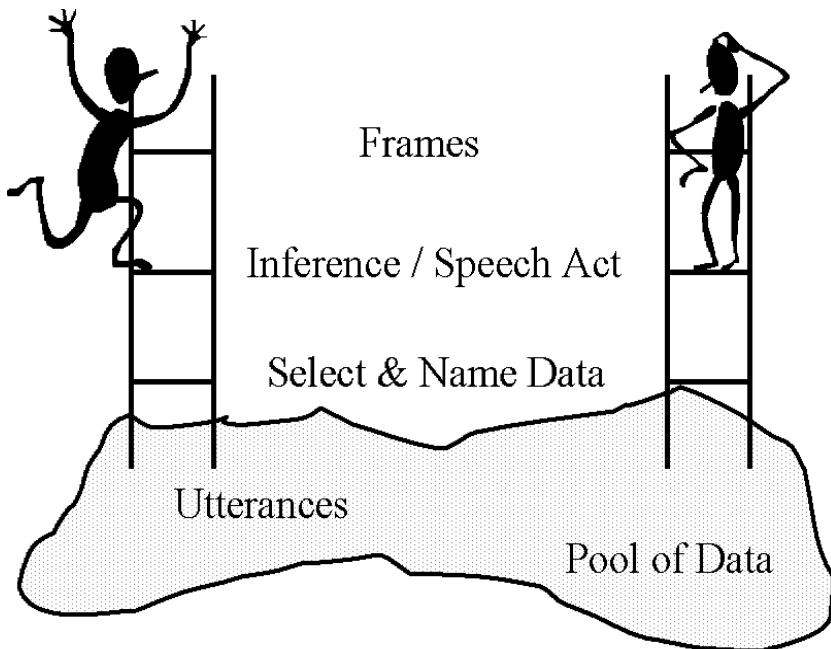
### **3. A Speech Act Model**

Language as a presentational symbol system is language as art. It falls broadly within the metaphor of communication as performance (Putnam et al., 1999). The idea of a speech act is similar to the actor's idea of an objective (Hagen, 1973; Stanislavski, 1936). The actor thinks in terms of what the character wants, the speech act is what a person does. Both are an effort to capture the action that is taken through words. When my mother said, "it feels a little cold in here," she was making a request for me to put on a sweater. Her objective was for me to put on a sweater, her speech act was to make a request. I understood her because I interpreted her utterance. I made an inference that she was not looking for other opinions on the temperature, nor was she looking for someone to turn up the heat, nor was she even looking for someone to offer her a sweater. All utterances require some interpretation (Winograd & Flores, 1986), they require the listener

to make some inferences about what is meant. Understanding the speech act is always an act of interpretation and the resulting understanding is an inference. I draw upon this idea of speech act as inference to create a speech act model of communication.

The model (see figure 1) consists of a speaker and an audience, each standing on top of their own ladder of inference. The ladders are rooted in a common pool of data. The ladder of inference is a tool from the study of action science (Argyris et al., 1985; Senge et al., 1994) for analyzing our own inference making process. There are various versions of the ladder of inference, I work from the form described in *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* (Argyris, 1990). The first rung of the ladder is selecting and naming the data. The second rung of the ladder is the inference that is drawn from that data. The third rung of the ladder is the frames that lead us to make that particular inference based on that data. By frames I mean all of the assumptions, casual theories, schemas, scripts, mental models, etc, that lead us to understand things in one way rather than another way. For the speaker, communication is modeled as an inference that is an intended speech act (either conscious or unconscious) that then moves down the ladder and appears in the pool of data as an utterance and performance characteristics. The audience then selects and names the data and makes an inference as to what the speech act is (either consciously or unconsciously).

Figure 1



Let us go back once again to my mother's remark and look at how the model describes it. My mother thinks that I should put on a sweater. She doesn't want to directly tell me to put on a sweater, perhaps because she knows that her twelve-year-old son does not react well to being told what to do. Instead she says, "it feels a little cold in here," a more subtle approach, one that may create some feelings of guilt, one that doesn't sound or feel like an order. I select various data. I note that I am the only one in the room who is not wearing a sweater. I hear the words, see the glance in my direction, note the tone of her voice – all instantly and without being consciously aware of it – and I make the inference that she wants me to put on a sweater. Somewhere deep in my subconscious I have a frame that I learned that says if my mother says it's cold and she takes no action to make it warmer than it's not about her being cold, but about her concern for others, probably me (the baby of the family). I also recognize this concern as a powerful force that should be addressed and something in the tone of her voice tells me that it should be addressed immediately. I put on a sweater.

#### **4. Implications of the Speech Act Model**

From an action perspective, I suggested that the weakness of the conduit model is in the implication of language as a perfectible discursive symbol system. My speech act model sees language as inherently about the interpretation of the action that is taken through a largely presentational symbol system. This leads to a different set of implications for the performer, for the audience, for the analyst/critic, and for teaching. I will now look at each of these in turn.

##### **4.1. Implications for the Performer**

Let's start with the classic instrumental concern, how can I make sure that the person I'm talking to understands what I mean? I, as the performer, will perform some utterance and the audience will interpret that in some way. How will they interpret it? In terms of the model, the question becomes, why does someone go up the ladder of inference in a particular way? When my mother said, "it feels a little cold in here," I could have made several different inferences about what she meant. She might have meant that as a request for someone to turn up the heat. She might have meant that as an attack on my father for being cheap and wanting to save on the heating bills. She might have simply wanted to engage in conversation to connect to her family. I suggest that there are three broad categories of reasons for why I made the inference I did – frames, context, and aesthetics.

Many theoreticians have suggested that actions are determined by our frames (Argyris et al., 1985). The theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974) that govern

our behavior are a crucial part of the inference making process. In my earlier description/analysis of my mother's statement, I mentioned my frame "that if my mother says it's cold and she takes no action to make it warmer than it's not about her being cold, but about her concern for others, probably me." I was certainly not conscious of that frame, but without it I would never have been able to make the inference that my mother wanted me to put on a sweater.

Winograd and Flores (1986), following the work of Heidegger, suggest that language can never be completely explicit, that there is always some implicit understanding based upon the context in which the statement is made. Had my mother said, "it feels a little cold in here," at someone else's home and in response to a question about whether she was comfortable, I would have made a different inference about what she meant. The context of being in our home, with only our family present helped me to make the particular inference I did.

I teach my students the importance of the context for interpreting the speech act by presenting the same utterance in two different contexts. First, I sit in front of them and sing a bit of the song "Plastic Jesus" while playing the banjo. I then ask them what the speech act is, how do they interpret what I just did. They make a variety of efforts at interpretation, but generally have some difficulty with identifying the speech act. I then ask them why it is so hard and usually something about the context surfaces. It may be the lack of context, the apparent inappropriateness of their teacher playing the banjo in a lecture, or the lack of connection between my performance and the context; all of which are reasonable explanations. I then tell them that I am going to repeat the utterance and ask them the same question. This time I show a videotape of a scene from the film "Cool Hand Luke" in which Paul Newman sings "Plastic Jesus" and plays the banjo. I play enough of the film to provide some context. The students immediately identify the speech act as Newman is mourning the death of his mother. The performative aspects of playing the banjo and singing also provides an obvious bridge into the importance of aesthetics.

I use aesthetics to mean "a form of *communication* (different from *speech*) which can take place to the extent that expressive actions – or the artifacts which these produce – become the object of sensory knowledge and hence a way of passing on and sharing particular ways of feeling or ineffable knowledge (Gagliardi, 1996 p. 566, italics in the original)." In my earlier analysis I mentioned the tone of my mother's voice. She did not say it as a joke, nor as an inquiry. From the direct sensory feel of how she communicated, I made an inference as to what she meant and what she didn't mean. In Paul Newman's performance of "Plastic Jesus" it is clear that he is sad from the tears rolling down his cheeks, the tone of his voice and the tempo of the song.

As a performer, looking to make sure that the audience understands my communication in the same way that I intended it to be understood, I have two clear prescriptions. First, I might cognitively try to address the interpretative nature of the inferential process. That is I might try and explicitly name my

frames and the audiences' frames as I understand them, then explicitly advocate the speech act I intend, illustrate my advocacy with specific data, and inquire as to how the audience is understanding my communication (Fisher & Torbert, 1995). This is a strategy designed to move communication in the direction of being a discursive symbol system. Framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring can be used effectively to reduce ambiguity and make the communication process more effective and efficient. Taken to its extreme, we can use our knowledge of this inferential process to greatly increase our effectiveness in interpersonal interaction through action science and action inquiry techniques (Argyris, 1990; Argyris et al., 1985; Fisher et al., 1995; Torbert, 1991).

The second prescription starts from the realization that of the three categories of reasons for why the audience will go up the ladder of inference one way as opposed to another, frames and context are, in the short term, largely unaffected by me as a performer. However, the third category, aesthetics, is completely within my control. I have the ability to control my performance when I communicate. I can use language's ability to be a presentational symbol system. I can speak poetry, I can act – I can perform in the best sense of the word.

The two prescriptions are by no means mutually exclusive. I might frame, advocate, illustrate, and inquire in an artful way that consciously uses language as a presentational symbol system. Artful performance can be enhanced by an explicit cognitive knowledge of technique. And surely cognitive technique can be enhanced by embracing the sensory aesthetic aspect of our day-to-day reality.

#### 4.2. Implications for the Audience

As an audience, broadly speaking, I have the same two prescriptions. First, I can cognitively realize that I have made an inference. This leads me to hold the inference lightly, to treat it as an untested inference rather than as fact. Rather than acting on the inference, I might test it, perhaps by inquiring of the performer if that is what they meant. One of my undergraduate students describes her experience with testing her own inferences at a large party on campus.

I was introduced to a guy named Bill. He asked me where I was from and I said New Jersey. Coincidentally, he lives there too. So we started talking about places in New Jersey. Bill then commented on my outfit. He said, "What's up with that outfit?" Before I jumped to the conclusion that I should interpret his comment as an insult, and then get back at him, I explained to him that I had just come from a 70s party, and that's why I looked the way I did. I held my inference instead of acting on it right away. I then asked him if my outfit was really that different from everyone else's that he needed to comment on it, and he said that he didn't think that I looked that different from everyone else, but he thought that my outfit was kind of cool.

She made the immediate inference that the speech act Bill had made with his utterance, “what’s up with that outfit?” was an attack on her. Her instinct was to attack back. However, she was able to hold her inference lightly and rather than acting on it and returning the attack, she tested her inference and found out that his intention was very different from her original inference.

In this case, she had done some preliminary analysis of her own behavior and realized that because of her own insecurity she tended to make very defensive inferences when meeting guys. She had come to suspect her own frames, which freed her to be able to test her inferences rather than act from them. However, we might also look at the context and aesthetics of the interaction as reasons for why she made the inference she did. The context is a college party. We know virtually nothing of the aesthetics, having only the text, so we shall have to imagine what they might have been.

Even though her insecurity and the resulting frames may have been the dominant reason that she made the inference she did, I think we can imagine Bill having said, “what’s up with that outfit,” in such a way as to indicate genuine interest. I find it more likely that Bill was attempting to be witty in the way that American 20 year old males have learned from popular culture. I suspect the delivery was somewhat sharp and a bit sarcastic and cutting. When confronted about his intention, Bill backpedaled and claimed one of many possible interpretations for his utterance. His attempt at humor had failed so he pretended it wasn’t an attempt at humor and instead was genuine interest. And to give Bill some credit, he may have had genuine interest (and some accompanying vulnerability), which he was trying to mask with humor. My point being, that the aesthetics probably also played a significant part in why she made the inference she did.

This example illustrates some of the real life complexity of communication. What was Bill’s real intended speech act? Was there only one? I suspect Bill intended to flirt, to play. He had genuine interest in her clothing and her. I am no expert on the courtship rituals of the American college student, but I think that we could not reasonably expect Bill to simply state his genuine interest. It is a rare twenty-year-old American male that could be that vulnerable. Besides, that’s not how the game is played. Thus we see the speech act as being complex, partly conscious, partly unconscious, constrained by the culture, and even intentionally unclear.

The aesthetics and context are, in the short term, largely unaffected by me as the audience. I can look at my own frames and I can test my inferences. I can treat the aesthetics and context as important data. But it is data that is difficult (perhaps impossible) to translate into explicit discursive language. It is data that will always be contested. Just as art is subjective, so to are the aesthetics of interpersonal interaction. Bill was able to say that he was interested in her clothes (and imply that he was not making fun of them) because of the subjectivity. There is always some level of plausible deniability in the aesthetics. This doesn’t imply

that we should follow the rational, cognitive tradition and ignore or discount the aesthetic experience. I only suggest that aesthetic experience is presentational rather than discursive and that there are difficulties in dealing with that in a rational, cognitive, discursive way.

As I suggested for the performer, I suggest for the audience to think of language as art – to engage the performance with your whole body as you would poetry or a play. Cognitive, rational reasoning has a place, but so does analogic (Torbert, 1987), holistic reasoning. We must feel as well as think if we are to be a good audience.

### 4.3. Implications for the Analyst/Critic

For the organizational analyst, the speech act model provides the same sort of detailed model of dyadic communication that the conduit model does. It changes the focus to include the possibilities of language as a presentational symbol system. The speech act model is a useful analytic tool for instrumental questions. However, in answering those instrumental questions, it moves into the aesthetic sphere and by doing so provides a route for doing aesthetic analysis of communicative action as well.

We know that language is an artistic medium, we celebrate language as art in the forms of poetry and literature. We play with language, we perform with language, we constitute our world through language. The key word being “we”. Our sense of “we”, our sense of the group is fundamentally an aesthetic sense (Sandelands, 1998). Communication by definition, is not a solitary act. The speech act model grounds the analysis of communication in aesthetic experience and provides a rigorous framework for instrumental analysis. Bridging the aesthetic and instrumental spheres leads us to strange new places such as divergent generalizability and connective validity.

By recognizing that language at its best is a presentational symbol system, by starting from an idea of language as art, we have a very different goal than the “perfection” of language into a discursive symbol system inherent in the conduit model. We look to not just communicate effectively and efficiently, but to communicate beautifully. Acting through language becomes art and thus all of our interactions with others become potential art. That is not say that we might expect all of our interactions to be beautiful (or grotesque or comedic or agogic or whatever aesthetic category to which we aspire). Making art means taking risks and failing more often than not. But it also means succeeding sometimes. It means producing those occasional moments of connection, moments of connection when we know what it is to be “we”.

#### 4.4. Implications for Teaching

As a teacher of organizational behavior or communication, the speech act model provides the same sort of fundamental model of dyadic communication that the conduit model does. However there is a difference in the implicit ontology and epistemology of the two models. The conduit model implies a logical positivist view of the communication as a discrete, observable act that can somehow be known in all aspects and thus in the ideal case, perfected. The speech act model suggests a more socially constructed, interpretivist world that is always dependent on context and where meaning is negotiated. For me, and I suspect for many other teachers of organizational behavior and/or communication, the ontology and epistemology of the speech act model is more in line with my personal beliefs and the rest of my course.

I also use the speech act model to integrate disparate organizational behavior topics. When dyadic communication is understood as being based in the interpretation of inferences, the general question becomes, why do we make the inferences we do? Different topics in organizational behavior provide different answers to this question. For example, theories of perception suggest that common distortions to the perceptual process such as stereotyping and the halo effect lead us to make certain inferences that are not logically justified based on the available data. In terms of the ladder of inference, the halo effect is that we are holding a frame that says if person A has certain positive characteristics then they also have other positive characteristics, even though there is no logical reason to suggest such a relationship.

Moving beyond the individual, I look at the study of organizational culture (from an integrationist perspective (Martin, 1992)) as a study of commonly held frames that lead to a group of people making the same sort of inferences from the available data. From this perspective I understand Schein's (1992) theory of leadership and organizational culture as saying that the culture is created within an organization by people adapting the frames of the organization's leader(s). Taking an even broader view, Morgan's (1997) various images of organizations are understood as different frames that lead us to select and name different data and make different inferences.

And of course, the speech act model is grounded in action. A speech act is speech as action. To the extent that management is an applied field with hopes of theory being reflected in day-to-day practice, teaching must be connected to action. For me as a teacher that hopes to connect theory and action for the student, the speech act model is a solid starting point. I use it to connect analytic, academic theories of organizations and organizational behavior with actions – with how people make meaning and take action through speech.

All of which is not to say that the entire organizational behavior course has to be action based and centered around the speech act model as a unifying concept. Many ways of teaching organizational behavior involve a variety of ontological

and epistemological perspectives, such as Bolman and Deal's (2003) four frames approach. I have found that with only a lesson on the ladder of inference as a tool for teaching the idea of multiple ways of constructing meaning and social reality as preparation, students easily learn the speech act model. The idea of a speech act may be philosophically complex (as when Austin and Searle (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) discuss it), but in practice it is intuitive and can easily be explained using the language of verbs and objectives (Hagen, 1973; Stanislavski, 1936).

An action perspective can also be introduced as simply as requiring a project that includes analysis, action and reflection (e.g. Miller, 2004), or if desired, any of a variety of tools for reflection can be introduced (such as the learning pathways grid (created by Action Design ([www.actiondesign.com](http://www.actiondesign.com)), see Rudolph et al., 2001 for a fuller description), the change immunity map (Kegan & Lahey, 2001), and/or Quinn's (2000; Quinn et al., 2000) advanced change theory.

The real payoff for the students come when they apply the model to problematic situations that they are having in their own lives and they get insight into how their own construction of reality is part of the problem. When they manage to act differently (as the student at the party did) and find that their own construction of their social reality was faulty, the results can be quite amazing. As one of my students summed it up at the end of an oral presentation, "the ladder of inference kicks ass."

## **5. Concluding Reflections**

I started by saying that my research interests were in organizational aesthetics and reflective practice, and it feels structurally nice to end up there (in terms of my own sense of the aesthetics of writing). My interest in bringing aesthetics into my teaching comes from some deeply felt beliefs about modern organizational reality. I think that far too much of it is ugly. And where it isn't ugly, it's empty of feeling. I think we all have experienced rare moments of beauty and perhaps more frequently moments of comedy in organizations, but the pervasive aesthetic of most modern organizations is a disconnecting ugliness. I believe that this does not have to be the case and that an important step in changing it is to make aesthetics a legitimate and common part of the discourse about organizational reality.

I have similar normative beliefs about the value of reflective practice. I believe that organizations would be better places, that is they would be less ugly and more efficient, if organizational members regularly reflected on their own practice and took responsibility for the way in which they are constructing meaning. I think this is fundamental to an action perspective and a lot of the value of the tools I teach, such as the ladder of inference and the speech act model of communication described in this essay, is in the way they help individuals see how they are constructing meaning.

There are not enough such tools to suit my tastes. One of the great strengths of traditional organizational behavior textbooks is the abundance of practical tools – heuristics, taxonomies, action steps, two-by-two matrixes, etc – for connecting theory and action. However, these well established tools are generally based in a positivist, managerialist ontology and epistemology. Since I do not work from that ontology and epistemology I generally have the same sort of issues with those tools that I have with the conduit model of communication that I discussed above. I wish there were more tools that are based in a more constructivist, perhaps even post modern ontology and epistemology. I long for them, I lust for them.

It may sound strange to speak of longing and lust, but it is a part of who I am and part of my agenda is be to be fully who I am and encourage my students to do likewise. Bringing aesthetics into the discussion of organizations makes room for more of the whole person within the organization. It makes room for the noxious odors along side the cold steel of the computer. It recognizes humans as feeling as well as thinking beings.

My point here is not to ignore the instrumental questions of efficiency and effectiveness in organizational discourse, but to add the aesthetic questions of feeling and beauty. In terms of the instrumental questions, I close by offering some anecdotal results of teaching the speech act model of communication. They loved it. That is perhaps too strong, but when I have taught both the conduit model and the speech act model and asked students which they prefer, the answer has unanimously been the speech act model. More important to me are the pragmatic results. Earlier I illustrated some of the implications for the audience with a vignette that one of my students wrote. The vignette was from an assignment in which I asked them to experiment with their own behavior. Using the ladder of inference and the speech act model of communication the student was able to act differently in a social situation and achieve important results – i.e. she was able to meet a new guy and not alienate him with her own defensiveness. Her result is not unusual. I have had several students draw on this model to positively transform relationships with their parents, siblings, and significant others in ways that have brought me to tears. And that feels good, even beautiful. And beautiful action is my real goal.

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