



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