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Communication as a Practice

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A stance on “communication as a practice” serves communication theory by transforming our understanding of the theory-practice relationship. Before elaborating this point, I will first define the term *practice* and defend the theoretical claim that communication is a practice.

In one common usage, practice is what basketball teams do between games, or what public speakers do when they rehearse a speech in front of a mirror before delivering it. That is not, however, the sense of practice I am primarily using in this chapter. In the sense I am using, the entire sport of basketball is *a practice*—a coherent set of activities that are commonly engaged in, and meaningful in particular ways, among people familiar with a certain culture. Public speaking is also a practice in that sense. There are many kinds of practices—dietary practices, marital practices, scholarly practices, political practices, religious practices, business practices, and so on—and practices can be described at different levels of specificity. We can talk about “the practice of sports” or “sports practices”—either way meaning the whole, broad set of activities that come under the general heading of sports in our culture. At a more specific level, we can talk about the practice of club soccer, spectator practices at professional sporting events (such as booing), and collegiate athletic recruiting practices. Returning to the basketball example, I should point out that “basketball practice practices”—the things basketball teams do at practice sessions—are also practices. Basketball practice is a practice.¹

Practices involve not only engaging in certain activities but also thinking and talking about those activities in particular ways. Practices have a

normative—sometimes, even, an *artistic*—aspect. They can be done well or badly, and people tend to evaluate the conduct of practices in which they participate or take an interest (e.g., that was a great game, or that was an awful speech). By the same token, practices also have a *conceptual*—sometimes, even, a *theoretical*—aspect. In learning a complex practice, we learn a set of verbal concepts that we use for practical purposes such as planning, coordinating, instructing, praising, criticizing, telling stories, or otherwise talking or writing about the practice. Dancers and dance aficionados, for example, in their endless talk about dance, learn words for various forms of dance, movements, styles, performance qualities, and so on.

In short, as a practice develops, a normative discourse about the practice develops along with it. The normative discourse is characterized by specific *discursive practices*, or ways of using language for practical purposes (e.g., ways that critics, teachers, and dancers talk and write about the practice of dance). The normative discourse is a constitutive part of the practice. It is this ongoing communication about the practice—as standards of excellence, ethical norms, techniques, styles, and so forth, are continually conceptualized and disseminated through a culture—that makes the practice meaningful and regulates its conduct.

Although most of the normative discourse goes on informally among people interested in the practice, certain parts of it may become so technically sophisticated that only professional experts such as trainers, media commentators, or academic scholars can fully master them. As the discourse becomes more elaborate and specialized, scholars may begin to study the practice, write books, and offer courses in the history, theory, and philosophy of the practice as well as practical courses in how to do it. In this process, an academic discipline can evolve to become a constitutive element of a cultural practice, so we have academic dance related to the practice of dance, political science to practices of politics and government, literary studies to the practice of literature, and so on. In my view, that is essentially how the academic discipline of communication studies came into existence and how it relates to the practice of communication (Craig, 1989, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1999a, 1999b, 2001a; Craig & Tracy, 1995).

In the modern culture familiar to the writers and most likely readers of this book, however culturally diverse we may be in other respects, communication is a practice. In that culture, the term *communication* (or its equivalent in some other languages) is used to refer to a range of activities—communication practices—that involve talking and listening, writing and reading, performing and witnessing, or, more generally, doing anything that involves “messages” in any medium or situation. Coffee shop conversation is a communication practice, and so is mobile text messaging. Employee appraisal interviews are

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a communication practice, and so are community public participation meetings. Reality TV, letters to the editor, pop-up ads, political campaign rallies, praying, talking to one's kids about drugs, and calling home on weekends—all are communication practices.

Communication practices are not necessarily “good” ways of communicating, although, as practices, they must be recognizable activities and topics of critical discourse *as* ways of communicating. Pornography is a communication practice. Political terrorism is a communication practice (a way of sending a message). The ethical legitimacy of these forms of communication can be debated, but they are clearly communication practices, recognizable as such in our culture.

That it now makes perfect sense for us to list such a diverse range of activities all under the general heading of communication reflects an interesting cultural development of fairly recent historical vintage. The idea of communication has a long history, but only in the last century has it become such a prominent way of talking about social practices (Cameron, 2000; Craig, 2001b; Mattelart, 1996; Peters, 1999). If communication is now a practice, as I am claiming, then communication, according to my definition of a practice, must be a coherent set of activities that are commonly engaged in and meaningful to us in particular ways.

How do we know that communication is a practice? We might think we know that communication is a practice because everyone communicates, but the mere fact that everyone does something does not necessarily make it a practice. Everyone breathes, for example, but breathing per se is a sheer biological function, not a social practice. For the most part, we do not practice breathing as members of a culture, we simply breathe. There are notable exceptions. Students of yoga, for instance, learn specific breathing exercises that are integral to the practice of yoga. In the culture of yoga, therefore, breathing is more than just a biological function; it is a meaningful practice.

Communication can be a sheer biological function like breathing. At the most basic level of information exchange, all organisms communicate, if only by replicating their DNA. Complex species have evolved elaborate signaling processes such as mating rituals. Distinctive forms of human communication, ranging from pheromones (chemical signals emitted by the body) to gesture, speech, and language, have evolved biologically and occur universally in all human societies. By itself, the mere fact that these basic communication capacities occur universally does not prove that communication is a practice. Just as breathing is a meaningful practice in yoga, however, ethnographers of communication tell us that all human groups have particular, culturally meaningful *ways* of communicating that are, in fact, practices (Hymes, 1974; Philipsen, 1992).

We might, then, think we know communication is a practice because all cultures have communication practices, but this still does not prove that communication per se is a practice (a coherent, meaningful set of activities) in any culture. For communication per se to be a practice, there must be a *cultural concept of communication* referring to the general kind of practice that people are engaged in whenever they communicate. It is not a foregone conclusion that every culture has such a normative concept of communication or that people everywhere are “practicing communication” when they engage in activities that we, in our highly communication-conscious culture, might regard as communication practices. What people in particular cultures (and particular corners of “our culture”) actually think they are doing when they communicate is a key ethnographic variable. Philipsen opened his classic article on “Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville” with the observation that “talk is not everywhere valued equally” (1975, p. 13). In the urban neighborhood Philipsen studied, communication was not an appropriate way for men to resolve problems. Instead, men were expected to use other modes of action such as “silence, violence, and nonverbal threats” (1975, p. 13). Although silence, nonverbal threats, and even violence can all be regarded as forms of communication, the upshot of Philipsen’s analysis is that communication per se was not a meaningful cultural practice among Teamsterville men.²

So, in claiming that communication is a practice in our culture, my point is not simply that we communicate a lot or that we have communication practices. My point is that communication per se has become a meaningful practice for us. We regard communication in general as an important kind of activity that can be done well or badly in all of its many forms. We are “particularly self-conscious and reflexive about communication” and generate “large quantities of metadiscourse about it” (Cameron, 2000, p. viii). The term *metadiscourse* (discourse about discourse) refers to a variety of common *metadiscursive practices* or ways of talking about communication for practical purposes (e.g., “they are getting their message out” or “we need to sit down and talk”). These ordinary ways of talking about communication give the practice of communication the specific range of meanings that it has for us. In our culture, this normative discourse about communication has developed to such an extent that an academic discipline of communication studies, with its technically sophisticated metadiscursive practices (comprising what we call communication theory), has been instituted and now plays an active role in cultivating the practice of communication in society (Craig, 1989, 1999b).

What, then, are the consequences of this stance on theory? My claim is that a stance on communication as a practice transforms our understanding of the theory-practice relationship. Traditional understandings of theory and practice tend to be of two kinds. One is the “practical” perspective that

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theory is useless (“it may work in theory, but . . .”). The other is the “scientific” perspective that valid theory, by explaining causal processes in nature, forms a basis for technological applications (“knowledge is power”). The perspective of communication as a practice suggests an entirely different way of understanding theory and practice. Although that transformed understanding cannot be explained fully in this short essay, the following paragraphs briefly summarize three essential points:

1. Theory is a practice.
2. Theory provides ways of interpreting practical knowledge.
3. Theory is fundamentally normative.

1. *Theory is a practice.* Whatever else communication theory may be from other scientific or philosophical perspectives, it is also a kind of metadiscursive practice, a set of expertly designed ways of talking about communication that are available to be used in everyday discourse (Craig, 1999b). Theoretically informed ways of talking about communication (for example, using concepts like information overload, online community, personal space, conflict styles, team collaboration, or media literacy) disseminate through society insofar as people are exposed to them and find them practically useful for their own purposes. Some of that dissemination goes on in college classrooms, when teachers and students use theoretical concepts in discussions of realistic examples. Participants may find themselves thinking and talking about communication in new ways, with a more sophisticated awareness that influences their practice of communication in situations outside the classroom. We, as both scholars and practitioners, all participate in this ongoing activity—this *practice*—of cultivating the practice of communication. As we have become more aware that we are engaged in this practice, some of us have naturally begun talking and writing about it. A normative discourse has emerged, and scholars have begun to refine and formalize it. This chapter is an example of normative discourse about the practice of cultivating the practice of communication. Here, and in other theoretical writings, scholars are attempting to create useful new ways of talking about communication theory. For example, I have suggested that we use the term *practical discipline* to refer to academic disciplines, such as communication studies, that are engaged in cultivating particular social practices (Craig, 1989), and several scholars have suggested methodological approaches to practical communication theory (e.g., Barge, 2001; Craig, 2001b; Craig & Tracy, 1995; Tracy, 1995).

2. *Theory provides ways of interpreting practical knowledge.* Practical knowledge—the basis of our ability to perform successfully as participants

in a social practice—is largely tacit and unconscious (Schön, 1983). Imagine trying to explain to someone everything you know that enables you to carry on a successful conversation with another person. Although you might come up with a few general rules (use eye contact, listen, be relevant), no amount of explanation could more than scratch the surface of the complex habits, skills, background information, and situational awareness that even a simple conversation requires, much of which cannot be articulated verbally. As every novice user of cookbooks or computer manuals knows, even the most explicit instructions can be useless to someone who lacks the skills and background knowledge required to follow them. No theory can tell us everything—or, in a sense, anything—we need to know to participate in a practical activity. Practical knowledge comes only with the accumulation of direct experience.

Is theory, therefore, useless? The largely tacit nature of practical knowledge does limit the role of theory to some extent; however, it does not warrant the extreme conclusion that theory and practice are unrelated (see Craig, 1996a, in reply to Sandelands, 1990). Theory contributes to “discursive consciousness” (Giddens, 1984), our conscious awareness of social practices and ability to discuss them knowledgeably. Discursive consciousness enables activities such as reflection, criticism, and explicit planning, thereby shaping practical conduct. A theory of a practice provides a particular way of *interpreting* practical knowledge, a way of focusing attention on important details of a situation and weaving them into a web of concepts that can give the experience a new layer of meaning, reveal previously unnoticed connections, and suggest new lines of action. Classroom communication, for example, can be discussed in terms of information processing, group dynamics, or ritual, among other theories. Each theory illuminates a different aspect of the situation and suggests a different approach to practical problems.

3. *Theory is fundamentally normative.* In the traditional scientific perspective, the application of theory to practice is technological. Scientific theory describes underlying mechanisms that explain how things work, and practice, using theory-based tools and techniques, can exploit that scientific understanding to produce desired outcomes. As applied to communication, this scientific-technological perspective cultivates an “effects” orientation such that, for example, the application of theories of persuasion in advertising should produce measurably more persuasive ads, and theories of conflict should lead to measurably more efficient conflict resolution.

A stance on communication as a practice is not opposed to using communication techniques or trying to improve communication outcomes by applying scientific theory and research. Those are perfectly legitimate practices.

However, it is important to see those practices within a bigger picture. Contrary to a narrow scientific-technological view, practice involves much more than using conscious techniques to achieve predetermined goals. The discourse about a practice is fundamentally normative, fundamentally about defining elements that constitute the practice, coordinating and regulating activities, deciding what goals are important, making evaluative judgments, and the like. As MacIntyre wrote, a practice derives its value from more than just the “external” goods or pragmatic outcomes it produces. More essential to a practice are its “internal” goods, the “standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175). On this view, becoming an excellent communicator means more than just learning how to get results. It means growing as a person, appreciating the values that underlie good communication, developing the skills and character traits that naturally emerge from serious engagement in the practice of communication, and thereby contributing to the cultivation of those communication-based values, skills, and traits in society.

MacIntyre’s theory of practice is idealistic, to be sure, and the idealism of his theory is precisely what makes it practically useful as a spur to critical reflection. Applied to communication, it invites us to reflect on the standards of excellence that underlie our everyday choices and judgments about communication. All theories are potentially useful in that way. Every theory, considered as an interpretation of practical knowledge, presents an idealized normative standard for practice. How useful a theory is depends on the relevance and validity of the ideal forms of practice that it implies. As we use theory in talking about a practice, therefore, it is equally important to reflect critically on the ideals implied by the theory we are using.

Normative ideals should not be taken for granted in theory or in practice. Cameron (2000) has argued that beliefs about good communication currently ascendant in mainstream British and American culture reflect middle class, feminine stereotypes and questionably imply that men, working class people, and ethnic minorities are deficient in communication skills. Related ideological biases in communication theory have been pointed out by other scholars (Carey, 1989; Deetz, 1994; Grossberg, 1982; Mattelart, 1996; Schiller, 1996).

The practice of communication theory thus contributes to the normative discourse that constitutes and regulates the practice of communication in our culture. As scholars and practitioners, we cannot be uninvolved observers. We are engaged in that ongoing communication about communication and

have the responsibility of active participants. Or so it will be, if our stance on theory is that communication is a practice.

Notes

1. For other views on the concept of practice, see Bourdieu (1992), Gadamer (1981), Giddens (1984), MacIntyre (1981), Schatzki (1996), Taylor (1985), Turner (1994), and Wenger (1998).

2. A version of the Teamsterville article was reprinted in Philipsen (1992). Philipsen did not explicitly conclude that communication was not a meaningful practice among Teamsterville men. He did, however, observe that communication had a different and relatively less important role in the “code of honor” that characterized Teamsterville culture than in the “code of dignity” that characterized other American sites he studied (see Philipsen, 1992, pp. 101–121, 124).

Additional Readings

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