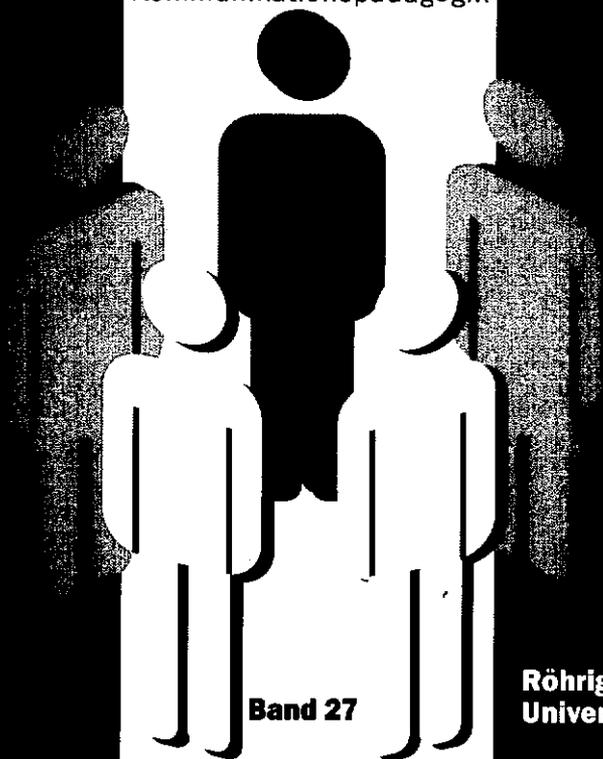


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Applied Communication Analysis in Diversity Training: A Case Study

Communication training is a common emphasis in workshops and applied programs that occur in educational and organizational settings. Traditionally, this form of applied communication has focused on skill development, such as developing speaking, listening, and presentation skills. However, applied communication also extends to the development of analytic skills – what is commonly referred to as “critical thinking” – as the basis for understanding and changing personal and organizational practices. In this essay, I describe a case study of how applied communication analysis functions in a leadership training workshop to change personal and organizational practices concerning sexual diversity.

For the past three years, I have conducted workshops for the Leadership Education and Development (L.E.A.D.) program on the University of Maine campus. The L.E.A.D. program is not an academic program; rather, it is offered by the Division of Student Affairs under the auspices of the office of Student Organization and Leadership Development (see <http://www.umaine.edu/sold>). One of the primary goals of this office, as the name suggests, is “to positively impact and influence the student culture and experience at the University of Maine” by providing training for students who wish to become leaders in campus organizations, clubs, and groups. The L.E.A.D. training program is designed for “the emerging leader or those students willing to engage in personal leadership development.” Furthermore, L.E.A.D. training is required of students who wish to become members of the leadership staff of the Wade Center for Student Organizations.

While the L.E.A.D. program is housed in an educational organization, it resembles and is modeled after leadership training programs found in a wide range of organizations. For these organizations, the development and training of existing and potential leaders is seen as

crucial to the development and success of the overall organization. The L.E.A.D. training program addresses a wide range of skills, including motivating organization members, managing group dynamics, team building, and “leading for change.” My contribution to the training program was part of a larger concern with diversity in organizations, a concern that has received a lot of attention in the past decades, especially among large organizations and transnational corporations. These organizations address diversity in order to demonstrate a commitment to equality, respect, and, perhaps more importantly, an organizational climate that facilitates and supports the best performance of all employees. Typically, the concern to foster diversity in such organizations is posed less as a question of social justice than it is as one of many “bottom line” concerns for such things as individual and group performance, overall productivity, and recruiting and retaining employees in a competitive market.

For the L.E.A.D. training program, I was asked to address the topic of language and communication diversity. The director wanted a workshop that would take on the problem of sexist language in organizations. I agreed to participate on the condition that I would reframe the focus from sexist language to one of fostering inclusive language and communication. I began the workshop with the proposition that inclusive language and communication assumes the equal moral worth of all persons and promotes possibilities for self-expression and self-determination (summarized in Peterson, 1994). This orientation emphasizes the operation of language as an institution rather than as an expression of individual intention. In other words, I argued that most organizational members do not intentionally act to trivialize, insult, or exclude women. To illustrate this point, I asked workshop attendees to fill out a sentence completion exercise (suggested by Ivy & Backlund, 2004). They wrote phrases to complete sentences with beginnings such as: “Before a judge can give a final ruling, . . .” and “After a nurse has completed training, . . .” and “After a college athlete graduates, . . .” The most common way to complete these sentence openings is to employ a pronoun. Not surprisingly, research suggests that writers employ pronouns that reflect stereotypical understandings of occupations: that is, judges and athletes are seen as male

and nurses as female. Thus, even when an individual speaker takes care to avoid sexist language in speaking and writing, it is still possible for the habitual and collective operation of discourse to function in sexist ways.

We then discussed the patterns of discourse that emerged in our discussion of the exercise with regard to politeness conventions. In particular, I turned our analysis to the operation of power and status in determining who can initiate talk, take the floor, interrupt, change topics, and so on. This discussion illustrated how the move to inclusive language and communication requires more than avoiding pseudo-generic pronouns and offensive or derogatory terms. The move to inclusive language and communication requires these potential leaders to examine and revise what they take to be “normal” communication practices. I concluded the workshop by suggesting that the lessons that we learned about removing sexism from our habitual patterns of discourse could be applied to other areas such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and ability.

In subsequent workshops I began to expand the amount of time devoted to sexual diversity and heterosexism in discourse. Part of the reason for this shift came from my recognition that students had some familiarity with ways to avoid sexist language, but were less familiar with how discourse conventions and practices constrain diversity. They knew not to refer to women as ‘girls’ and to use gender-neutral terms, for example, but they were less familiar with how to alter existing practices and habits beyond the level of the word. In the workshops that followed, I incorporated more material that would draw attention to how discourse establishes and promotes a set of norms and, therefore, how communication is both normative and normalizing. Rather than describe these varied efforts piecemeal, I have organized them according to Michel Foucault’s (1976) analysis in *L’Ordre du Discours* as a way of drawing out the theoretical framework that informs my approach. The examples I use – some from the workshops and some new – are taken from local newspapers and serve a dual purpose of being familiar to workshop participants and of reflecting my own research interests. The analysis of these newspaper examples served as the basis for workshop participants to develop critical

thinking and analytic skills and to apply those skills to issues in their organizations.

Foucault explores how discourse is ordered as event. This approach has the advantage of avoiding two common problems in diversity workshops. The first problem is the tendency to “blame individuals” for sexist and heterosexist practices. This tendency positions discourse as an expressive operation of an individual – a view Foucault explicitly rejects. The second problem is the tendency to defer responsibility for change and to excuse the lack of action because “that’s just the way it is.” In this case, discourse is seen as a type of universal mediation that treats all speakers the same – also a view Foucault rejects. Instead, Foucault asks how is it that this event appears rather than others, how is discourse distributed in a series, according to what regularities, and in what possible conditions (Foucault, 1976, 216-228)? In what follows, I describe each of these questions and illustrate each with an example of journalistic discourse.

The first question, of how it is that this particular event appears rather than others, requires the examination of external rules which work to delimit discourse. These external rules delimit discourse through prohibitions, divisions and rejections, and oppositions. When we look at journalistic discourse, for example, we know that anything that happens does not constitute “news.” A good example of this type of exclusion comes in the absence of newspaper reports on a recent vandalism incident in Poland, Maine. Only one newspaper in the state, the *Sun Journal*, carried a brief report under the headline: “Lesbians’ Home Trashed” (Tice, 2006), and that report did not appear until more than a week after the incident. Why was this incident not reported when other vandalism incidents have been? Other reports of vandalism – of vacation homes, of businesses – appear regularly. Indeed, the lack of attention to this incident became part of a Maine Public Radio report that contrasted it with the highly visible response to the desecration of a Lewiston mosque that took place about the same time (although it should be noted that MPBN did not air a report on the original incident either). Is this incident not seen as newsworthy because it concerns women (gender) who are lesbian (sexuality) and live in a mobile home (class) in a small town (regionalism)?

Another system of exclusion concerns the division of what is taken as meaningful from what is not. For example, consider how the first sentence of the newspaper report frames the incident: “Two Poland women say vandals destroyed their home – breaking windows, trashing belongings and scrawling sexual obscenities on wall – because they are lesbians.” The newspaper does not document the event as an event, rather it attributes its occurrence to the women who “say” it happened. This division of what the women “say” from the “event itself” is also evident in the lack of a police report for the incident where, as the newspaper reports later in the article, the police “continue to investigate and have not charged anyone with a crime. ‘Sometimes it doesn’t pay to run right out and make an arrest,’ said Lt. Glenn Holt.” The operation of external rules can also be found in ordinary organizational discourse: workshop participants can discuss the lack of recognition and invisibility of partners and family members in both official documents as well as informal office talk, the failure to provide gender-neutral bathrooms for employees, the privileging of heterosexual relations in office decorations (e.g. photos), and so on.

A second type of regulatory principle in discourse concerns what Foucault calls “internal rules.” Internal rules classify, order, and distribute discourse according to regularities. They make it possible to classify an event as belonging to a particular type of discourse, such as a major narrative that employs recognizable formulae, rituals, and archetypal characters. Consider the similarities in the openings to the following two newspaper reports: the first is from the now classic article on the 1969 Stonewall Riots published in the *New York Daily News* under the headline “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees are Stinging Mad” (Lisker, 1969): “She sat there with her legs crossed, the lashes of her mascara-coated eyes beating like the wings of a hummingbird. She was angry. She was so upset she hadn’t bothered to shave. A day old stubble was beginning to push through the pancake makeup. She was a he. A queen of Christopher Street.”

The second article comes nearly four decades later and was published in the *Bangor Daily News* under the headline “From James to Jenny” (Anstead, 2003):

When Jennifer Finney Boylan opened the large window in her office, she hoisted the frame with strong arms and stretched one foot out ballet-style behind her. Her summer skirt rose slightly, and she yanked at it correctively before sitting. With a flip of her long blonde hair, Boylan smiled and said that, like a lot of women in their 40s, she has her priorities straight. She loves her two boys. She loves her partner; her friends and her job as co-chair of the English department at Colby College in Waterville. And she loves being a woman.

It's the last priority that is winning Boylan national attention these days. She began life as James Boylan, but in 2002 had gender reassignment surgery and is now Jenny, tall, lithe and female. She's still a parent of two. She still lives with the woman she married before the surgery. And she still loves her friends and job. All that is the same. Except now she has a C-cup bra size and manicured nails with pink polish.

Despite the differences in tone and subject matter, both articles share a common formula: a surprise or reversal narrative that reveals "she was a he" and that constructs characters through a focus on emotional displays, appearance, and body parts (such as eyes, hair, fingernails). After discussing the operation of internal rules, workshop participants discuss the major narratives of their organizations, the "characters" that populate the office, and the rituals and formulae that regulate sexual diversity.

The third regulatory principle in discourse concerns rules for speaking subjects, for who is qualified to speak, how are roles appropriated, to what extent are they interchangeable, how are they diffused, and who has the "authority of experience." One way to examine the operation of these rules in newspaper reports is to compare versions from different sources. One example that I employed in workshops to illustrate these rules is taken from the coverage of the 2002 murder of Gwen Araujo in Newark, California. I distributed three clippings to participants: one from *The New York Times*, one published in the *Bangor Daily News* (from a Knight Ridder Newspapers account), and one from the Gay.com/PlanetOut website. After participants read the clippings, I ask participants to compare how the speaking subject is

constructed. *The New York Times* (Murphy, 2002) refers to the subject, “Eddie Araujo,” as “a 17-year-old man” and uses a male social title (“Mr.) and masculine pronouns. The *Bangor Daily News* (Wronge & Reang, 2002) refers to “Eddie Araujo” as “a stunningly beautiful girl [. . . that] was actually a 17-year-old cross-dressing boy” and uses masculine pronouns. The Gay.com/PlanetOut (Rostow, 2002) report refers to “Gwen Araujo” as “a transgender youth” and avoids using pronouns in favor of a neutral term, “the teen,” and in subsequent reports, feminine pronouns. These three clippings demonstrate three different ways of constructing a subject in discourse – and how little authority the subject of the discourse has in that construction.

The coverage of the Araujo case raised problems for news organizations who were criticized for disrespect in their reporting. The Associated Press ran a rare self-reflective article whose headline asked: “Was Eddie ‘Gwen’ Araujo a ‘He,’ or ‘She?’” Of course, phrasing the question in this way retains the normative construction of Araujo as male by putting the self-selected name, “Gwen,” in quotes. Other news organizations adopted guidelines, such as those proposed by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD, 2006). For workshop participants, these examples raise similar questions about how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender employees are named and constituted as speaking subjects. For campus organizations, the rules governing speaking subjects became an explicit topic of concern for fraternities and sororities in the negotiations with their respective national governing bodies over membership regulations.

Taken together, these three examples suggest Foucault’s fourth principle which regulates the possible conditions of existence in discourse. In brief, they outline the operation of heteronormativity in journalistic discourse where heterosexual relations are taken as the norm and all other possibilities are positioned as abnormal. And, as a norm, heteronormativity is both unmarked and un-remarked in journalistic discourse. The women in the vandalism case, for example, are identified as lesbians; but how often does a newspaper account draw attention to the sexuality of “straight” or heterosexual subjects? Consider this sentence from a *Bangor Daily News* (Higgins, 2003) article

on the fifth annual Statewide Civil Rights Team Conference attended by more than 2,000 high school students: “the conference welcomed presentations from representatives of nearly every conceivable sexual orientation, ethnic group and some religious organizations.” Here, the reporter emphasizes the abnormality of including “every conceivable” group while the normativity of white, heterosexual groups does not require mention. That is, heterosexuality is taken as a norm, not merely in the sense of frequency of possible conditions of existence, but in the sense of moral authority for what is “normal” and what “ought to be.” When participants turn to explore organizational discourse, they discuss the way sexuality is positioned. They consider not just the organizational expectations for “normal” behavior (the need to “toe the company line”), but also those interactional norms that govern communication. For example, workshop participants discuss the visibility of heterosexual relations in office gossip (who is seeing whom) and the expected invisibility of similar relations for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender employees.

Discourse examples drawn from newspaper accounts have yielded productive material for the L.E.A.D. sexual diversity workshops. Because such newspaper accounts are familiar yet clearly distinct from organizational discourse – that is, they don’t hit too close to home – workshop participants find them easy to analyze in a kind of “what’s wrong with this picture” approach to critical thinking. The challenge for workshop participants is to abstract the analytic skills they learn from discussing journalistic discourse and then to think critically about the discourse of sexuality in the organizations, groups, and clubs that they hope to lead. Foucault’s framework for understanding the ordering of discourse gives participants a way to unearth (an archaeological metaphor) the sedimented regularities of discourse: the external rules, internal rules, speaking subject rules, and rules for possible conditions of existence. Developing skills in applied communication analysis – and not just skills in speaking, listening, or presentation – helps participants to achieve the stated program goal: that is, “participants will gain deeper insight and understanding of themselves and explore their potential as leaders.”

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