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## Review of Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rroc20>

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Available online: 18 Mar 2011

**To cite this article:** William M. Keith (2011): We are the Speech Teachers, Review of Communication, 11:2, 83-92

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2010.547589>

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# We are the Speech Teachers

William M. Keith

*This article discusses the point and purpose of disciplinary history in communication, and offers an account of pedagogical, performative, and meliorative threads in our disciplinary history.*

*Keywords: Rhetoric; Speech; Pedagogy; Democracy*

One of the odd things about writing disciplinary history is discovering that such history is not always intrinsically interesting to members of the discipline. They may find actual history (as opposed to partial histories, nostalgia, or reminiscences) embarrassing, irrelevant, or perhaps inimical to their current projects. Yet the central question of disciplinary history—Who *were* we, and what does that mean for who we are and may become?—is ineluctable. As a multitude of Foucauldian studies remind us, while our intellectual genealogy is not destiny, it makes a huge difference in how we understand ourselves and what counts as possibilities for our choices going forward.<sup>1</sup>

The late Michael Leff once reacted to a project of mine, which became *Discussion as Democracy*, by saying, “Keep digging. What we need is a *useable* history” (Keith, 2007). What I would like to canvas here is some of that history and its uses. After arguing that disciplinary history matters, since history can serve as a resource, I will briefly outline some of the substantive things I learned about the disciplinary history of speech communication.<sup>2</sup>

I began my project by trying to find out what the “discussion course” was. I knew that it had been a staple of the field before 1960, but had all but disappeared since then (Philipsen, 1998). I wanted to avoid whiggish histories that select a few publications to trace a path to one’s favored vision of the present and future; such histories argue for one strand over another as determinative, but they fail to make an

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historical case, since they are so partial. I also wanted to go beyond celebratory reminiscing; while perfectly appropriate on the right occasion, and potentially informative, it cannot suffice by itself. So I resolved to start following one idea and document to another, and the trail never went cold. It led me from discussion, to debate, to pedagogy, to John Dewey, to the Discussion Movement, to adult education, and to the Forum Movement; from 19th century debate societies to Chicago classrooms, to Ford Hall in Boston, to New York City progressives, and to radical democrats in rural Iowa.

What I discovered in this journey was a disciplinary matrix that was at once very familiar, and fascinatingly different, from our contemporary understanding of ourselves. Many of their ideas are deeply, sometimes invisibly, embodied in our practices and self-understandings. It is not my role (here) to be an advocate for their specific ideas (though many of them were smart and absolutely worthy of advocacy), but to illuminate the ways in which they understood their work and how that can enlighten us, different as we are.

### **The Matrix of the Discipline**

“Matrix” is an interesting metaphor for a discipline, since it gives a particular meaning to “context” (Kuhn, 1970). From a Latin word for womb, it is also used in mathematics for a regular array of values representing a complex function, and in geology as the finer-grained substrate in which crystals are embedded. In biology, a matrix is the surrounding tissue in which some element (a fingernail or tooth) grows; it is also the principal metal in an alloy, as in the iron in steel. Matrices “give birth,” in a sense, to something, or serve as a condition of possibility for it. In the mathematical case, the algebraic matrix produces its output in a fully determined way, while in the case of wombs, tissues, and rocks, a looser relationship holds.

Sometimes even people who are very well versed in intellectual history write as if one can just follow ideas around, since ideas have a life of their own. Indeed, they sometimes seem to, but this is more the result of a type of analysis than a fact about the world. As Steven Shapin has argued, in the 16th century, the matrix for intellectual or scientific work was a complex set of social relationships that made witnessing, asserting, and arguing possible; only men of a certain social standing could be trusted to “see” things and be allowed to speak and write about them (Shapin, 1994). In our own time, the university and the discipline fill this role; the former is the college we work for, and the latter are the professional networks that legitimate our research. As a working definition of a discipline, for the purposes of history, I offer a genealogical one: the set of institutions, people, publications, and ideas that are the predecessors of the ones we have now. Notice that, except for ideas, these have a somewhat determinate history. While we were in graduate school, we might have read Marx or Augustine or Wittgenstein or Montaigne—or Lao Tzu or Ambedkar or Bhabha. So some of our ideas might have come from anywhere. Yet the institutional structure of graduate education is disciplinary; it requires us to be conversant in “our” literature (as ambiguous as that may be) and to (generally) get a

degree from a certain kind of department, in order to get a job and tenure at a relatively similar kind of department. And this is true not just of ideas: a whole complex of values, tropes, rationalizations, techniques, and dreams are passed on just as surely.

### **Dialectic and Disciplinary History**

Notice that, right here, an interesting dialectic emerges between similarity and difference. All graduate programs in a given field are, of course, different; it makes a difference where you went to school. But in another sense, they are all similar; that is what makes a communication degree different from a degree in theology or economics or classics. This dialectic of similarity and difference can be discerned at both macro and very micro levels. It exists between texts and within texts, and often the tension is obvious in a single career. Any simple or straightforward way of attempting to pin down a discipline is bound to fail, as, I would argue, is the attempt to act as if one could understand one's own work without reference to a disciplinary frame—or the intersection of frames, or the mutant crossing of frames.

Disciplines produce us, though not in a deterministic way; they both limit and enable us by providing both a hermeneutic horizon, as well as at the same time making it possible to transmute them and innovate ourselves into a disciplinary future, a set of possibilities at once old and new. Nietzsche and Foucault both emphasized this role for history—its capacity to be both limiting and productive. Ideas, in the Western world since the 1880s, grow up with, and develop out of, the work of people in disciplinary matrices. While it might sometimes be profitable to follow around a word as the token of a concept (Peters, 1998; Rogers, 1994), the “same” term or idea in different disciplines and eras will invariably mean different things, even if a family resemblance exists between them all. As Kuhn's work on the history of science showed, we should be wary of assuming that intellectual history is cumulative, or runs in anything like a straight line. Thus the question of where we have been and where we are going is quite complex, and not at all like standing at a crossroads and looking over one's shoulder to see the direction from which one came, knowing that the opposite direction must be the path to the future. It is more like being in a jazz jam session, with its mix of structure and improvisation. You may know what the original theme was and where the harmony has taken you, but to know where to go next requires a deep knowledge of one's fellow players, their musical traditions, their personal habits, and the setting in which the improvisation takes place—in addition to what the audience came expecting to hear.

The interest of disciplinary history should be widespread and durable. And yet, it is not. Several speculations come to mind as to why. Just as in the history of science, we tend to skim off the best bits, turn them into a comprehensible strategic narrative, and ignore the rest (Brush, 1974). This sort of history, while whiggish and incomplete, has its uses and virtues (and Raymie McKerrow, 2010, displayed most of them recently in these pages). Yet few reckonings of disciplinary history go back past 1960, even though “we” have been around officially since 1914. Perhaps some of

what came earlier is in fact dross, just embarrassing steps on the way to respectability, but we do not really know that until we have looked with sympathetic eyes. I have many times been told, in conversation about my projects, that I really should not pay any attention to the work of the 1920s through the 1940s, since it has been superseded by much better work. With all the respect due to the concept of progress, this argument is invariably made by people with little or no knowledge of the earlier literature and certainly not its disciplinary context. Typically in these exchanges (and this is just my experience), an important new theory or technique, borrowed from another field, is used as the current standard against which our predecessors look either quaint or pathetic. Such borrowings themselves are unremarkable; they are a standard part of how every discipline does business and may be the source of the best new work. But deriving a historiographic implication from them is fruitless. No, speech scholars in the 1920s had not read Foucault or mastered structural equation modeling, but they had read a good many interesting things, and understanding these scholars on their own terms might still be productive.

Another reason for ignoring history might be that, well, one does not know what to do with it. I would argue that the early field had a heavily bootstrapped quality; they were not sure how to construct a history for themselves, and Charles Woolbert (1916) in particular was influential in arguing that it was important to survey the best of then current thinking across fields and move forward from there. Except for a few rhetoricians (as demonstrated by Beard, 2005) who attempted the work of articulating a history leading from classical rhetoric to speech teachers, arguments based on tradition were not a big item in the early field, and they still are not. This habit parallels, to an extent, one in the natural sciences: while it is important in principle to replicate experiments, nobody can make a career out of it, since there would be no glory or creativity in it (Collins, 1992). If no one in communication is interested in arguments about or from history, then graduate programs are not going to teach it, except as the occasional flourish, because it will not be relevant to the success of their graduates. As a practical matter, disciplinary styles of argument can form a significant constraint, with real consequences.<sup>3</sup>

An important argument for paying close attention to our past is what we might call “history loss.”<sup>4</sup> *Pace Santayana*, repeating history is not likely to be our fate; rather it will be to lose out on an important set of resources, important both because they have (in subterranean ways) shaped us, and also because they may be “new” to us and provide wherewithal for our current projects. How so? Part of the reason that our forebears look naïve or simpleminded today is that *their* answers to *our* questions are not very good. But they had different questions, and attending to the ways in which they did give smart answers to their own questions might teach us not only to understand our own questions better, but also to revive old questions—and answers.

The burden of my case here would be met by a history that described, in detail, what was lost and why it matters. I believe that *Discussion as Democracy* (Keith, 2007) does this, and so I should outline what I think we have learned about our discipline’s history from this project. I do not think this a final or canonical history. Far from it; nothing could be more satisfying than to be proven wrong by a new generation of

scholars who have deeply engaged the history. But for now, here is what I think I have learned.

### **Pedagogical**

We were, in the beginning, the speech *teachers*. Our original association was the National Association of the Teachers of Public Speaking (NAATPS). Each term here is important. “National,” because this subsumes an emerging set of regional associations; the field is no longer tied to a school or a group of schools in a region. “Association,” because the existence of such an association was widely seen to mark the existence of a discipline and could be used as leverage to form new departments. “Teachers,” because the primary mission, taken over and evolved from private elocution schools, is to provide skills; originally, the mission of these elocution schools was exactly parallel to private local music schools (imparting skills to kids whose parents could afford it), but “teaching” in the early field moves well beyond this, as we shall see. “Public Speaking,” because this course displayed the important features of the new disciplinary self-understanding; in fact, many faculty were also teaching lots of oral interpretation and debate among other things, but public speaking and its differences from declamation were the key. Public speaking was focused on function rather than performance for its own sake, and especially public/civic functions as then understood. And those in the early field were not particularly concerned with *what works* in teaching, but more what teaching *meant*. As out of place as it may seem to those who work in the modern research university (but not at all to those in other types of institutions), the greater part of our institutional identity flows from the pedagogic imperative.

### **Performative/Spoken**

We began, crucially, as the *speech* teachers. Those in the early field taught, and taught spoken performance. They taught all the uses to which the voice could be put except singing (public speaking, declamation, performance of literature, debate, etc.). The contemporary interest in performance (both actually and as theory) could not be more traditional. A key moment to the early field is the move toward the unification of the spoken word under a conceptual heading. One version of this is contained in Charles Woolbert’s (1916) article that lays out the relationship of speech to other disciplines; this formulation (Are we really more like psychology or sociology?) has led to a set of enduring identity problems. A more productive synthesis begins with the move away from “elocution” and “declamation” and toward “public speaking,” a term that was somewhat novel (Keith, 2008). Public speaking, in textbooks through the next few decades, was pictured as on a continuum with “ordinary” conversation. This move allowed speech teachers to conceptualize speech as a collection of human activities; our current enthusiasm for “texts” requires us to work backward toward rediscovering action and performance (Philipsen, 2007). Crucially, at this point, the early field also

began to articulate notions of context, the contexts of speech performance and action: business, personal life, political, and social life.

### American

The speech field, as it developed into the communication field, seems to be a genuine case of American exceptionalism. While one can find departments of literature, philosophy, mathematics, and engineering all over the world, communication departments in other educational systems bear only a passing resemblance to ours, being more like mass/media communication departments or cultural studies units. In particular, the U.S. emphasis on performance courses as the core of teaching, and research designed to improve performance, is unique to U.S. universities.<sup>5</sup> It is legitimate, at this point in history, to ask if we still value our public-speaking tradition enough (and *mutatis mutandis* the interpersonal, group, and other courses that have a performative component), or if these have become mainly service courses, no longer truly at the core of majors that focus on social science, rhetoric, or cultural studies. Raymie McKerrow's call to internationalize our conceptions of communication and rhetoric is exactly on target, and has as its corollary the possibility that we are bringing something valuable to the international context.<sup>6</sup> After presenting a paper about the tradition of teaching public speaking in U.S. secondary and post-secondary education, I was astonished by the positive response, for which I could take little credit (Keith, 2011). Participants from a variety of countries remarked, "This is great—we should be doing this." And so they should, in ways that are adapted to their languages, cultures, and political systems; my suspicion is that we would learn an enormous amount from these adaptations and translations.

### Meliorative

The performative emphasis has implicit in it a disposition to melioration. The point of teaching communication skills would be to improve them, to make a student a "better" or more "effective" (very loaded words) communicator. Now, we mostly teach *about* communication, but the same considerations apply. A distinctive part of the speech tradition, which still appears in all sorts of places in teaching and research within our field, is this impulse toward improving the ability, skills, and coping of students and others. Let me immediately make two points. First, without question, the opposite moment is discernable. While we started as the NAATPS, almost immediately people wondered what our contribution to the emerging research university might be (Winans, 1915). This was prescient, since at that time there were few research universities, and the problem endures—might we transform ourselves from speech teachers into communication researchers? *Could* we evolve into "just" cultural studies or social science, commenting, perhaps deeply, on the facts of how communication operates in society or people, but not teaching it only *about* it? A chair at a large research university is reputed to have lobbied, in the 1990s, to eliminate their public-speaking course, since "real disciplines don't have skills courses." Whether this was

actually said, it invites us to ask ourselves about how history figures into “real,” “discipline,” and “skill.”

Second, there must be a political agenda implicit in any meliorative stance. No matter how deeply buried or unacknowledged, there has to be a picture of “good communication,” “ethical persuasion,” “functional relationships,” and so on behind the teaching, a picture at which one’s teaching aims. The early field was much more alive to the political dimension of “good” and “effective” in teaching, which has often been hidden—and then subsequently (re)discovered by later scholars.

### Political

I am the first to admit that one of the great surprises of writing *Discussion as Democracy* was discovering just how political were the teaching—and theory—of the early field. The discussion course, a mainstay of speech departments, until it evolved into the “group dynamics” or “small group communication” course of today, developed entirely in reference to political considerations. Based on controversies over debate from around 1916–1919, an increasing number of speech teachers were dissatisfied with debate (in both its classroom and extracurricular forms); even if debate taught some valuable skills, it did not teach to a particularly savory picture of democratic life. The great speaker on the platform seemed oh-so 19th century, and the prospect of clever legislative debaters confounding each other with minutiae, sophisms, and parliamentary tricks dismayed almost everyone. So they asked themselves: How should people in a democracy communicate?<sup>7</sup> The answer was that they should sit down and discuss things. I do not expect that to be satisfying here; putting the answer that way compresses a great many sources and arguments, treated in detail in *Democracy as Discussion*. But the point is that people took the political implications of their teaching very seriously, and attempted to connect them very directly to a social movement (“the forum movement”), which aimed to reform and renew public communication in a more democratic mode.

I am not saying that scholars and teachers of communication or rhetoric nowadays do not take the politics of their teaching and theorizing seriously; especially for those from a cultural studies/critical perspective, it is quite in the foreground (and as such can lead to a certain hopelessness; see Fusfield, 1997). But these notions of the political dimension of communication instruction are not in serious dialogue with the past, and I would argue that such a dialogue would improve them. At the very least, gestures of dismissal and contempt should be replaced by something more thoughtful and substantive. If one now takes, in proper critical mode, the purpose of studying rhetoric (or other modes of communication) as the unmasking of oppression, a serious and sympathetic study is required of our forebears to show that (1) they were not, at some level, engaged in a similar or convergent project, and (2) even if one ultimately rejects their procedural liberalism, they do not have something to teach us.

## Conclusion

Historians are supposed to wax eloquently about the future, but a deeper acquaintance with disciplinary history can make one less sanguine about doing so. Our present is certainly not the future our discipline imagined. Forty years ago, people who worked in speech communication departments, despite all their diversity of theory and method, had a sense of being part of a common project, and that sense is now lost. Most of us would be astonished to learn how many theoretical and scholarly discoveries, announced in their time as new fixtures in the disciplinary firmament, have been lost in the mists of time. Little enough survives for 30 years, let alone 100 years. Digging through these lost ideas and contexts can yield some real treasures, as well as detritus. The conversation I would like to see people having is one that takes in the largest disciplinary arc. Yes, it is true that classical rhetoric has something to teach us and is connected to our culture historically. But their projects were not *our* projects, while those of Winans and Woolbert and the rest are, like it or not, previous versions of our projects. In the meantime, we have added social science, continental philosophy, symbolic interactionism, and many other theories into the mix.

Yet in each case, can we ask: how did we make them our own? How, to return to the jazz metaphor, do we take these themes, textures, and harmonies and advance the jam, giving them the distinctive sound of speech teachers? How did that sound evolve—and where would we like to take it? For myself, I think we need to recapture the pedagogical, interventional, and meliorist foundations of our field, and map them into the future. In the context of the 21st century university, the founders of the NAATPS may look very sophisticated indeed. Here is a radical thought: I think the important theoretical problems of rhetoric and communication theory manifest themselves in rich, complex, and satisfying ways in the context of our basic courses, and that we should take these courses seriously as sites of political action and theoretical, critical reflection (Campbell, 1996).

While fully understanding the economics of the basic course, I would still like to see doctoral students not “graduating” from teaching the basic course to teaching something else, but instead *ying* for the possibility of teaching skills courses in public speaking, small group, and listening courses that are the crucible of the discipline, the place where the various theoretical, political, and critical orientations of the discipline come into jazz-like energy. When we can fully reclaim our heritage as speech teachers, we will be ready to chart our disciplinary future.

## Notes

- [1] I never envisioned *Democracy as Discussion* as a “canonical” or final history of the field. I firmly believe—and hope—that it will lead others to new evidence that will complicate and enrich our understanding of our history. The work of Pat Gehrke and Josh Gunn demonstrates some of the uses to which disciplinary history can be put (Gehrke, 2009; Gunn, 2008, 2010; Gunn & Rice, 2009).

- [2] That is, those departments and institutions that led up to the departments whose members belong to NCA as their primary affiliation. For those in mass communication or journalism units, this history is less directly relevant, and of course there are many “mixed” or omnibus departments.
- [3] Composition/English has been much more radical in this regard, consciously attempting to construct, dispute, and value historical narratives. See Berlin, 1984, 1987; Crowley, 1998; Connors, 1997; Kitzhaber, 1997; Murphy, 2001.
- [4] Modeled on the concept of “Kuhn-loss” from the history of science. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* “Thomas Kuhn”: “Not all the achievements of the preceding period of normal science are preserved in a revolution, and indeed a later period of science may find itself without an explanation for a phenomenon that in an earlier period was held to be successfully explained. This feature of scientific revolutions has become known as ‘Kuhn-loss.’” Cf. Kuhn (1970, pp. 92–100).
- [5] It is not that, say, England and France do not have a performative component to their curricula, but they do not have disciplines devoted to it.
- [6] If one really wanted to internationalize rhetoric, either as cultural studies or in my more pedagogic formulation, a good place to start would be with a collection like *Alternative Modernities* (Gaonkar, 2001).
- [7] For an alternate take on politics in the early field, see Greene and Hicks (2005).

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