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## **THE ISSUES AT ISSUE: A DISCUSSION**

Four scholars of interpersonal communication, each a past or current editor of a major journal in communication met at the ICA convention in Montreal in May 1987 to assess the value of the methods, topics, exercises and concepts challenged by censors.

### **MULTI-SIDED PRESENTATION/TWO-SIDED DEBATE**

**McCroskey:** When the truth is an unknown, as it is in many cases but not all, then debate is used to discover what that truth is to the best of our ability. This is done in religious circles when there is a difference in opinion over the interpretation of a Biblical passage. When literalists differ with other literalists on an issue, it must be argued. That's what debate is all about. If the truth is well known and agreed upon by all then there is no need for debate.

**Jamieson:** Some believe that many of the same issues we debate about are not multi-sided. They believe that there is truth and they know it.

**McCroskey:** That's why we should draw issues from those things that they are willing to debate.

**Jamieson:** That would take "Should marijuana legalized"? out of the debate environment. Should such topics be out of bounds because for some they are not debateable?

**McCroskey:** The other alternative is to use the US Naval and Military Academy rules and just let their people debate one side as the academies did in 1954 on the recognition of Red China topic. We seemed as a field to tolerate that very well. That was the national debate question.

**Knapp:** But one basic tenet of education is that students should be exposed to a variety of positions on a variety of issues. We believe in exposing people to enough variety so that they can adapt in a variety of communication situations. A liberally educated person is a better communicator.

**Miller:** You believe that about issues you find conducive to your own thinking but you don't believe that about my issues. You won't let us talk about both sides of the creation of man issue.

**McCroskey:** We should let creationism be argued.

**Berger:** Under the tenets of a liberal education, it has to be.

**Miller:** We basically believe in people being exposed to various points of view and we question cutting off any topic whether it be left wing biased or right wing biased.

### **CLASS PARTICIPATION**

**Berger:** I would take a radical position. No one should ever be graded on class participation.

**Knapp:** We said earlier that we were interested in getting a diversity of opinion, getting people to see all sides of an issue. Isn't in-class discussion and participation one way to do it?

**Berger:** If some people want to do it, fine. In society not everyone is a political activist.

**McCroskey:** The objection in my mind is the requirement issue. If someone finds it objectionable, they shouldn't be required to take a speech class or participate in certain exercises in one.

### **JOURNALS/SELF-DISCLOSURE**

**Knapp:** When the interpersonal teacher says "I want you to hold hands to see just how electric the moment can be" and someone says they don't want to do it, the teacher might say "What's the matter? Up tight?" I know people are doing it and I object to it.

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**Jamieson:** There is an objection to mandated forms of self disclosure: keep a journal of your ongoing communication with intimates . . .

**Berger:** There's nothing intrinsically wrong with that so long as the person is told that they have the right to privacy and can exclude whatever they want. Someone who pushes then is wrong.

**McCroskey:** If you were doing that for research, you'd have to allow them to opt out and the same standards should apply to instruction. Any instructor in our department who wants to mandate self-disclosure must clear it the way we clear research.

**Knapp:** But you know that when that journal is filled with superficial stuff, the teacher will say, "There's nothing intimate here. There's no disclosure here. That's what I wanted them to learn how to do." That student will be penalized with a lower grade.

**McCroskey:** I object to teaching people that they should self-disclose more. To me that value is wrong. There is no evidence to indicate that if we let it all hang out the world will be better.

Those who are objecting to that are right, not on a political issue but on an effectiveness issue.

**Knapp:** That's a value orientation on our side—that there is an inherently good form of interpersonal communication and it happens to be self-disclosive.

**McCroskey:** I haven't seen any evidence to support that position.

**Jamieson:** Do we lose anything if we give up teaching self-disclosure?

**Miller:** There's nothing wrong with teaching the concept and content of self-disclosure, the process and consequences.

**Knapp:** If you talk about interpersonal communication you're going to have people self-disclose. But there is no need for intimate self-disclosure because you can understand the concept without it.

**Berger:** Rather than do exercises, you can protect privacy by handing out the Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire, have individuals take it, score it themselves; they know their score, no one else knows it. You can collect the scores anonymously, compute a mean for the class and say "Here's the mean." I've done it with self-monitoring and Machiavellianism. These tests are to some degree unreliable. There is nothing bad associated with being a low self-monitor or a low self-discloser. In class, we talk about the advantages and disadvantages. You try to undo the value connotations of the instrument.

## ROLE PLAYING

**Berger:** I think role playing is a useful technique but if it's offensive to someone they shouldn't be forced to do it. If they are forced to do it, that's wrong.

**McCroskey:** The clinical data suggest that some people become able to see from another person's vantage point by taking another role, but that not everyone does.

**Berger:** But you certainly shouldn't be forced or graded. I don't trust the ability of a high school or college teacher to judge a performance.

**McCroskey:** We can't even agree on competency criteria in public speaking. We have failed as a field to develop our ability to judge oral performances. There's a lot that can be learned about the field of communication without ever opening one's mouth. We know we can teach at the cognitive level and we have some indication that it has positive effects on later lives.

**Knapp:** If we say we have principles and if we say they can be taught, then those things can be evaluated.

**McCroskey:** You can evaluate them but can you determine if the student has significantly improved as a result of what we're teaching?

**Berger:** You put someone in a class for eight to ten weeks. You can't really expect to alter their communication after they've had 18 or 19 years of history. One thing you may learn is how to organize things better. It may not affect your verbal output one iota.

**Miller:** We can't competently assess group discussion.

**McCroskey:** The data would indicate that the number one criteria in assessing the *quality* of group participation is the *quantity* of group participation. The more the talk the higher the evaluation. It's been reduced to absurdity by taping and bringing it down to light bulb flashing. The light that flashed the most represents the person who talks the most and who was the highest evaluated light bulb.

**Berger:** I would object to grading based on the number of words produced.

**McCroskey:** But that is exactly what it is going to be based on.

**Berger:** Now you could say that the person who says nothing provides nothing to evaluate. There can be plenty going on in the head of a very quiet person. In some of those courses, talking a lot is valued. Those people who are quiet but very insightful are undervalued. Yet the studies show that the person who is most valued in the group is the person who talks the most. We aren't immune to that.

**McCroskey:** You are giving a grade that presumably reflects learning but is unrelated to learning.

**Miller:** If you think it's of value to get someone to talk more, then take the grade out. By giving someone a D for not participating you don't increase the likelihood they'll participate the next time.

**Berger:** We have the bias that says that if you are a good citizen you hold up your end of the discussion. Also in conversational analysis, that's an implication of the Gricean maxims. A good conversationalist is supposed to converse.

**McCroskey:** It may be the strongest bias in American culture: more talk means better person. . . .

**Jamieson:** So the recommendation that the child who is offended by an exercise not participate will yield a negative evaluation of the child. . . .

**McCroskey:** I don't think the issue should ever come up. In the properly designed classrooms, performance does not need to be evaluated. There are two exceptions: teaching oral proficiency in a foreign language and teaching public speaking. I work with hundreds of teachers every year and ask them what is it that you cannot evaluate in a student in the absence of oral communication? The only two examples that stand up are foreign language and public speaking. In every other instance we found a means of evaluation that was as good or better.

**Knapp:** As soon as you say these things are going to be graded you've put an evaluative mark on it which is inappropriate given what the goal was. If the goal was to get them to do some subjective introspection, then who's going to grade that?

**McCroskey:** If I self-disclose, the grade is on myself and I don't think we should be grading selves.

## DECISION MAKING

**Jamieson:** Some hold that students would not come to their own decisions. Their decisions should be decisively shaped by parents and church.

**Knapp:** If we expose students to multiple perspectives, we are consistent with the goal of a university. A person who exposes students to only one point of view isn't doing anything different than what is done by the person objecting.

**Jamieson:** Is it a tenet of our field that individuals should come to their own opinions after considering everything that is relevant to them and should not uncritically accept the inherited wisdom of the past, the church or the adult community?

**McCroskey:** If they are bad at educating their children, then we may have impact.

**Jamieson:** It seems to me that their argument is that there is a relativistic philosophy underlying our concept of education. Competing positions are made to seem co-equal because they are discussed as alternatives. Whereas they think that there is a privileged position. Laying out alternatives becomes advocacy of relativism.

**Knapp:** That hits the fundamental substance of our field. The substance of our field is adaptation which they can interpret as a relativistic perspective.

**McCroskey:** Anything short of presenting alternative positions is not education it's indoctrination.

**Miller:** I think we'd need to say something like: In principle, we believe in exposure to multiple perspectives and the opportunity for people to make their own decisions about probabilistic questions on the basis of the evidence they have available. In practice we do understand that there are instructors in our midst who believe that they have the right answers and are in the practice of claiming that they instead offer alternative perspective. The position that it is of value to self disclose in class and tell people intimate things about yourself is a rigid position. If I were a right winger I would argue that even though you say you believe in multiple perspectives many of your teachers are as dogmatic in presenting their views as they think we are.

**McCroskey:** That is precisely the thing that got the field run out of California at the secondary level. They discontinued it as certifiable. The T-groupers, the ESTers, the sensitivity trainers, the "non-verbal is everything" folks were responsible. That's the bathwater. The problem is that the baby was thrown out with it.

## HOME SCHOOLING

**Jamieson:** With many academic areas, a parent can move to home schooling in the event that what is happening in the classroom is unacceptable. Can speech communication be taught at home? Or does it require the existence of a real heterogeneous audience?

**Berger:** You could teach a person to outline a speech or to gather materials at home without an audience.

**Jamieson:** Can we teach enough of what is important to say that we could teach in a home school a basic high school speech course?



**Knapp:** Home schooling can do some of what we do in mass lectures but it can't get further.

**McCroskey:** But we'd have to admit that the majority of students don't get farther than that when they go to school.

## THE JOHARI WINDOW

**Berger:** It's a two by two table: known to self, not known to self, known to others, not known to others. You have the four intersections of those possibilities.

**Miller:** The window concept is a metaphor for looking into yourself.

**Berger:** The desirable cell is known to self and known to others.

There is a strong value assumption: It's horrible if you're not known to self and not known to others.

**Knapp:** The concept itself is not value laden. It's how it's been applied. It's descriptive.

**Berger:** The problem is that once you're presented with that, it becomes obvious what the valued cell is. It's like many personality characteristics. It's like dogmatism, authoritarianism. It's obvious that you want to be a low authoritarian, a low dogmatic, a high self-esteem person. McGuire pointed that out.

## TESTS OF EVIDENCE

**Jamieson:** But what do you do in a classroom when discussing tests of evidence and a student says "I can tell you how to test evidence: What does the Bible say? The rest of your tests of evidence are irrelevant to me and ought to be irrelevant to you."

**McCroskey:** You say "I recognize that many hold that view. But if you are going to persuade those who don't you can't quote the Bible. The Bible functions as proof if you believe that it is God's word. If you don't then it isn't valuable as evidence." What you try to teach is why some ministers fail to convert and only succeed with their own believers.

**Berger:** But in a sense in the view of a person holding that position you are teaching them to be disingenuous. Instead of doing what is principled, do what is pragmatic.

**Miller:** You are not asking them to take a position incongruent with their beliefs. You are saying "If you ever wanted to convince me that the Bible is the only legitimate source of evidence, you'd better not use the Bible as evidence."

**McCroskey:** After you've done your investigation and determined your truth, that's when we come in. We are talking about the communication of truth. Very seldom does anyone stand before an audience and try to lie. We are not in the investigation business.

**Berger:** But some who teach argumentation teach that argument is a truth seeking tool.

**McCroskey:** That's the old distinction between dialectic and rhetoric. Dialectic is the seeking of truth; rhetoric is the advocacy of truth or of what you have presumed to be true or probable. That's the key. To teach them to use their rhetoric to advance their truth.

## GROUP DECISION EXERCISES

**Jamieson:** There is also concern about exercises used in group decision making classes. The exercise that places too many people in the life boat or in need of the same kidney machine.

**McCroskey:** I believe the kidney machine exercise is based in fact. That was the decision making process of a committee in Seattle, Washington. They had a city wide committee that was selected in order to determine who would live on the kidney machine.

**Berger:** The objection would be that you are putting young people in a position better left to mature adults.

**Knapp:** Then how does someone face those decisions as a mature adult if they have not had some earlier practice and preparation?

**McCroskey:** When we've used the bomb shelter and the kidney machine to teach value criteria, some of my students have asked not to participate. My solution is to let them step out without being penalized for not participating. When dealing with these issues, no one should be forced to participate if it's going to be traumatic. If someone has been trained at home not to be concerned about such issues, such exposure could be highly stressful. We can teach decision making without having them go through that.

**Knapp:** Can you say, "You don't have to participate verbally but you do have to come to the meetings"? Shouldn't they experience other people perceiving them not communicating? You can say that will be hard on them too. On the one hand you want them to learn about group decision making but

without having to talk about a topic they don't want to talk about. We need to find ways to accomplish the first goal.

**Miller:** We ought to be more careful about analyzing what we are doing when we teach communication. I don't see what those exercises have to do with communication. It is important for people in our field to have a set of rational criteria about what students ought to be learning and not to substitute experiential activities and social processes for communication. Then you could set parameters on the kinds of exercises you use either permitting people who don't want to participate to have options or trying to define a universe of exercises that would not be repugnant to people of various ideological views. If I were one of these parents, I would wonder what these students are doing sitting around worrying about a kidney machine since communication when I went to school was about finding ideas, organizing them, and presenting them effectively.

**Berger:** We have to ask if these exercises do what they purport to do. What is their pedagogical value? My sense is that nobody really knows what they do to communication behavior. One could argue that a teacher would be better off teaching basic principles rather than using exercises that may have no educational value. I don't see a modicum of data establishing the effectiveness of such exercises.

**Knapp:** There is data that those courses using them are more positively evaluated by students.

**Berger:** But there are no data that they are altering self-concepts or changing communication behavior. I'm not saying they don't. I'm saying we don't know. The real point of attack for someone objecting to these exercises should be the lack of demonstrated effectiveness.

**McCroskey:** We've stolen a lot of things that are good from psychology but we've also stolen a lot of trash. If we were forced to get rid of some of that baggage we might be better off. I'm not too disturbed except that the baby and the bath water can go out together. We do have significant abuses. I have no idea how to stop them. We have no regulatory unit. Some of us have been arguing for thirty years that we need certification in our field. Without it we have no way of controlling what's going on out there.