

## WSCA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2002

### The New World and Scholarship Translation Practices: Necessary Changes in Defining Evidence

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**T**HANK YOU FOR THE opportunity to share several thoughts about our discipline. Using last year's theme of "translation practices," I would like to take you on a journey to consider new directions and necessary changes in our scholarship. I am moved by Kant's (Jaspers, 1962) thinking that suggests we should be concerned with both the development of theory and practical behavior. Through both we come to understand our world.

As scholars in communication, we have a rich history of focusing on the practical while seeking knowledge about the communicative process. At some points in our history, those more interested in the practical applications and scholars concerned with studying communicative issues split into camps of individuals who often denied the legitimacy of each other. For example, elocutionists were involved with practical applications of public speaking while rhetoricians were more often engaged in developing theoretical proposals. Today, we have seen changes that allow us to better consider how to blend both the theoretical and practical to achieve a more complete picture of communication (e. g., Ford, Ray, & Ellis, 1999; Keyton & Rhodes, 1999; Parrott & Duggan, 1999; Petronio, 1999; Trost, Langan, & Kellar-Guenther, 1999). However, at least one more step is necessary. We need to foster the training of translators (Petronio, 1999). We can benefit from people working to convert theoretical perspectives and research programs into the practical. As of late, we have seen more emphasis on research that is connected to people's needs in the every-

day world and publication outlets that encourage this path (e.g., *Journal of Applied Communication Research*).

Nevertheless, a more concerted effort to make that translation process part of our vocabulary, our actions, and deeds is necessary. Through translation of knowledge about communication, we can bring critical information to those outside our discipline. In so doing, we can illustrate the contribution that our discipline can make to the betterment of others. When we ask why we are conducting our scholarship, we need to answer the question with reasons that focus on ways we help people in their everyday lives. Because we can give people insights into the complicated world of communication, we have an obligation to uncover how to contribute to the betterment of our world. Perhaps we can offer alternative ways for others to consider a problem, suggest options others may not have thought about, identify choices that are not obvious, and envision ways to frame a problem that never occurred to others outside our discipline.

If you are inspired by the desire to make our scholarship useable and connected to the everyday world, the next issue that might occur to you is "how?" How do we move from scholarship that might be published in an academic journal to the translation process that makes the information useable? One way is to consider the parameters of evidence.

In 1977, the *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, under the editorship of Walter Fisher with Gary Cronkhite and Jo Liska as guest editors, published a special issue on the criteria to judge admissibility of evidence. Considering this question was a critical move in locating the interface between theory and research. The 1977 volume and the 1994 reconsideration of evidence in *WJC* presented important insights into the way we define our research endeavors (Cronkhite & Liska, 1977; Petronio, 1994). Cronkhite and Liska argued that the most useful way to conduct research is to periodically unravel myths and frame scholarship in terms of an evolutionary process. They suggested we take note of Campbell's (1965) proposal that in order to produce noteworthy research, we must have variety, selection, and retention.

Perhaps more to the point, from Kant, we learn that the "crooked timber of science" (as cited in Shermer, 2001, p. 30) suggests the necessity of understanding that our social, historical, and cultural surroundings are in constant flux making it vital to continually revise the way we define the scholarly enterprise. Thus, in order for us to move closer toward translating our scholarship into practice, we must etch out new criteria for evidence that fit the needs of making such translations. What could that evidence possibly be? Probably one of the most important aspects of doing research and locating the parameters of evidence has to do with considering validity. Assessing the characteristics of validity signals the way a phenomenon is interpreted and

defined. One of the more convincing ways to determine whether we should have faith in arguments made to about any scholarship is through judging the establishment of validity. Because translation practices fall outside the borders of traditional research, we need new ways to make the leap into formulating our scholarship that permits it to be more useable for everyone.

For those people who ascribe to rhetorical scholarship, do not count yourselves out of this discussion. If you think about the meaning of validity, all aspects of the communication discipline grapple with validity in one form or another. Kaplan (1964) explains, "the root meaning of the word 'validity' is the same as that of the word 'value': both derive from a term meaning strength" (p. 198). In its most basic form, validity involves definitional issues and conceptualizations that are descriptive of phenomena. In the same way that Fabes, Martin, Hanish, & Updegraff (2000)<sup>1</sup> make the case that new validities are critical in coming to terms with developmental research, given our current world we live in, so too is it necessary to identify new validities to translate scholarship into practice.

Today I propose five new kinds of validity that reflect Campbell's (1965) evolutionary process for research and help us achieve the ability, as scholars in the discipline of communication, to satisfactorily serve the public. We need to make this conceptual shift as a discipline because we have some important and unique information to assist others. In addition, we can no longer presume that knowledge is for the select few to be found only in academic journals. As important, we need to recognize that more and more, our future is in the accountability of our discipline to those outside the field of communication. We are on the brink of an important shift in how we see ourselves and how others see us. If we take on this mission, we have the opportunity to situate ourselves as a discipline in the center of educating not only our students but also people in our communities. Doing so will reinforce the meaningfulness of understanding communication and provide for others.

These new "*practical validities*" must take into account the contextual, cultural, and applied foci of comprehending communication phenomena. First, "*experience validity*" refers to establishing the way we take into account the lived through experience of those we are trying to understand. We cannot presume we know their perceptions or framing of communication phenomena. Instead, to translate, we need to be accountable for locating people's positions as they enact communication. Not carefully investigating people's experience is analogous to treating all individuals, whose information we seek, as clones. Oddly, even within the domain of cloning, factors beyond genetics often are seen as impacting the outcome, but this is the point. This argument transcends gathering perceptual information and is as important when we use texts as relevant data for rhetorical scholarship. The

lived experience is housed in history, personal practices, and culture. To fully comprehend the information gathered, our validity (value) must take into account the larger frame. In so doing, we will get a step closer to the translation process because we will have uncovered critical information that makes the research more relevant.

Second, "*responsive validity*" means that, as translators, our obligation is to be receptive to human conditions and focus on the way communication influences and is influenced. The problematics of communication, where people are grappling with social quandaries, need to be taken into account. Translators must consider the consequences of communication for the human state and be mindful of how those consequences influence the way people understanding communication issues. We must turn our attention to a wider array of fundamental issues that respond to the concerns of people. To be effective translators, we must keep an eye on the changing needs seen in society and address those needs through research that can be receptive to helping people through dilemmas or crises. We have moved in this direction, particularly with our growing attention to health issues, but more is needed that turns the scholarship we engage in fundamentally useable for the public. As we do this, we will achieve responsive validity in our work.

Third, "*relevance validity*" refers to those aspects of the communication phenomenon that are significant to any given population being understood. We need to place greater value on the issues that are important for target populations. We cannot presume we know what is best for them or how best to address their communicative needs. Instead, we are challenged to learn what is relevant and use their definitions and understandings. Along with being receptive to people's needs, we are challenged to first find out what is relevant to any given group of people we wish to understand. To function as skillful translators, we cannot conduct our research first and then try to convince the general public that our findings are specific and useful to them. A more persuasive approach is to first spend time with the targets of research and then develop the way issues might be conceptually defined. Although this might not appear to have application for those interested in texts as data, relevance validity is calling for considering the context in which communicative actions take place and asking scholars to be mindful of the significance such data has for those who might be affected by the findings. Qualitative approaches often aim toward this practice, and as a result, much of research using this perspective has a better chance of achieving translation. However, I am not advocating all research become qualitative. Instead, I am arguing for all research, no matter the method, to allow for the possibility of being translated into something many individuals can use in their everyday world.

Fourth, "*cultural validity*" reflects the emphasis on the cultural perspective in which communication phenomena occur. This includes ethnicity and all levels of culture that are important to the communication phenomena at hand. Translators must make culture a critical emphasis, otherwise they will miss a significant aspect of converting their scholarship into practice. We cannot translate our scholarship without taking into account the way people enact organized behavior that forms the basis of cultural performances. The habits, routines, customs, and responses that both reflect and grow out of cultural values serve as the foundation for the frame in which to understand communicative action. Achieving cultural validity for our scholarship is an imperative to converting research into practice that allows people to employ it in their everyday lives. Without attaining this type of validity, translation cannot be accomplished. Consequently, addressing cultural validity is of critical importance in the translation process.

Fifth, "*tolerance validity*" is necessary to preserve ongoing practices and enable translators to capture the nuances of patterns without disturbing them. From this type of validity, we will be able to understand the taken-for-granted communication phenomena that occur in everyday life and pass that understanding onto others. Generally, researchers are not expected to influence the way people enact their behavior. Traditionally, not interfering with practices of people has been considered the means of remaining objective.

The notion of being an objective researcher has been associated with the way "science" should be conducted as a "value-free" enterprise (Kaplan, 1964, p. 387). The reason for advocating objectivity, that is, attaining assurance of "equivalences among objects of diverse origin" (Kaplan, 1964, p. 174), was an attempt to unhinge values from observable facts. However, if we want to work toward scholarship translation, we have to be clear on the way the values of those being researched and the researcher's values intersect. This is necessary so that we understand where the values of those we study cross over and when they are distinct. When we do that, we will be more able to embrace the values of those people we try to understand and have a tolerance for the principles and standards of others that are different from our own instead of casting the researcher's values onto those we study.

I have offered you a brief consideration of how we might become translators of scholarship through considering new validities. These new validities are not mutually exclusive, nor should they be. Through the integration of the proposed validities, we can determine criteria allowing for the admissibility of evidence and align our scholarship toward the translation process. Applying these new ways of conceptualizing a problem can make our work more accessible to the people who are not in academia. By reframing our scholarship (not all but some) with a goal that enables us to solve practical problems and in turn, shows its utility to a larger audience, we gain as a discipline. In taking

the challenge of translation into practice, we have the opportunity to illustrate the usefulness of our discipline. Now, after September 11, more than ever, we need to seriously consider the ways that our discipline can contribute to the betterment of people's lives. I can think of no better topic than communication, nor any other discipline than ours to make that contribution.

In closing, I would like to say that it has been an honor to serve as WSCA President. Our association is strong because our membership is committed to sustaining the life of WSCA. Thank you for the opportunity to serve and to talk to you today. I encourage you all, teachers, researchers, students, and administrators, to begin working toward becoming translators of your scholarship.

#### NOTE

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