

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER:  
APPRECIATING THE VALUE OF ORAL COMMUNICATION

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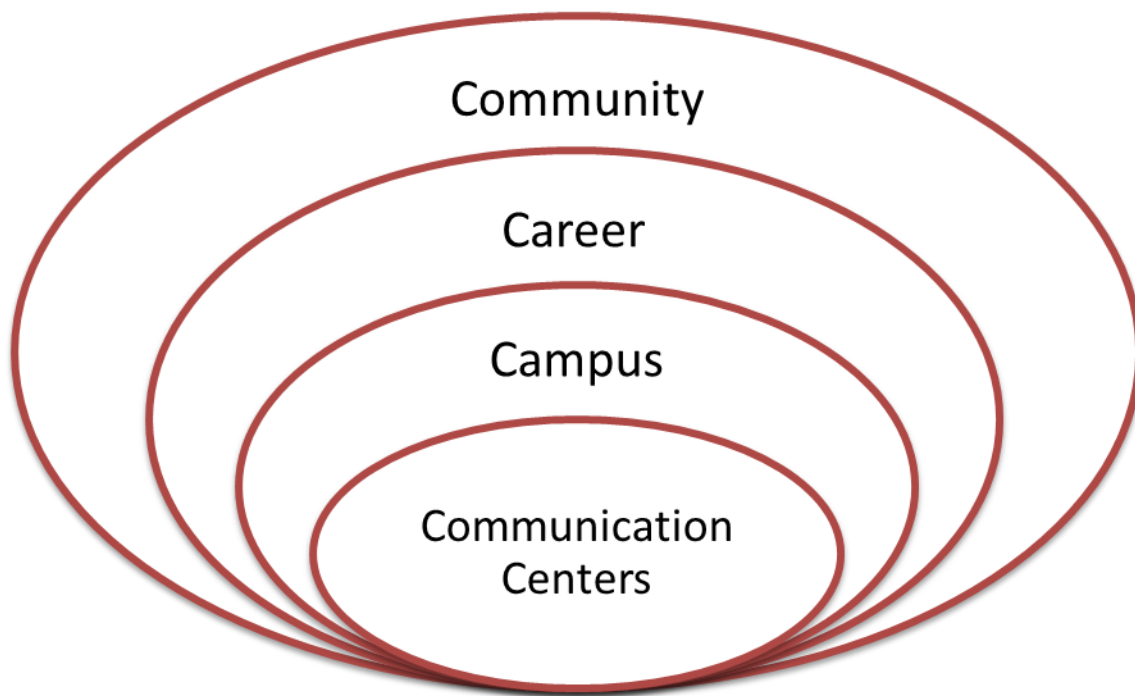
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I am delighted with Bonnie's theme of "Students at the Center," for it is both apt and evocative. Students come *to* our centers, and they *are* the center of our mission. Our tutors, peer consultants, coaches, advisors, and mentors are at the center of *accomplishing* that mission. And communication centers exist to empower students.

I hope to follow in the same evocative vein with my subtitle, "appreciating the value of oral communication"—both in the sense of how worthwhile oral communication is, and in the sense of how the value of oral communication grows exponentially. After all, as Isocrates noted a couple thousand years ago, "None of that which is done with intelligence is done without the aid of speech."<sup>1</sup> He continued, "to become eloquent is to activate one's humanity, to apply the imagination, and to solve the practical problems of human living."<sup>2</sup> Hey, that's *value!*

In particular, I'd like to address one of the questions Bonnie included in her call for this conference: *Why are communication centers important and relevant to student success?*

In doing so, let's explore how we can appreciate the value of students at the center, on campus, for careers, and In the community (see graphic below).



**I. Our centers are centered on our campuses.**

Our primary mission is to facilitate the educational process for our students, by working directly with students and by working with faculty on how to design, assign, and assess oral communication. And oh, how they need us! They've received a fair amount of instruction and practice in writing, and many of them still are (shall we say) challenged! But think about it: few of them have received any instruction and practice in speaking. The attitude seems to be that we've been talking since we were knee-high to grasshoppers, so we really shouldn't need any special instruction in it!<sup>3</sup>

And yet faculty regularly evaluate not only students' knowledge of the course material, but also their overall intelligence and their future potential, based on how articulate they are.

Research consistently shows that "communication apprehension and hesitancy to communicate undermine academic and professional performance."<sup>4</sup> Conversely, better communicators are better students: more articulate, more confident students have higher scores on college entrance exams, higher GPAs, more positive attitudes toward school, and better college retention rates.<sup>5</sup>

That's the value of better communication overall. Research specifically on peer tutoring, including communication centers, demonstrates that such assistance results in higher GPAs and higher retention rates<sup>6</sup>--and we need more such assessments! [There's a brand-new Communication Centers Journal, and I know editor Ted Sheckels would *love* to have good stuff like this to publish!]

Incorporating oral communication activities in the classroom: it increases students' motivation by making them active participants in the learning process, which creates a better understanding of the material in the course.<sup>7</sup>

As no lesser light than Ernest L. Boyer, past president of the Carnegie Foundation, argues that "As undergraduates [and graduates!] develop their linguistic skills, they hone the quality of their thinking and become intellectually and socially empowered."<sup>8</sup> Student engagement and understanding increase when a course uses significant oral assignments—when, as Bob Weiss argued, faculty "let students in on the educational act."<sup>9</sup>

Those of us in communication centers value "speaking to learn, learning to speak"—because we understand that oral communication is a *process of intellectual engagement*. As Tom Steinfatt observed, "the *cognitive* act of message formation and the *behavioral* act of message delivery . . . changes the way a student thinks about any issue, problem or topic area. . . . *The act of creating and communicating a message is at the heart of the educational experience*" (emphases added).<sup>10</sup>

By and large, students seem to recognize the value of oral communication in the educational process: At the University of Mary Washington, did students in the speaking intensive courses request more opportunities to write or to be tested? No—but they did ask for more opportunities to speak.<sup>11</sup> When the Graduate School of Management at Cornell offered classes in either writing or speaking, not enough students signed up for the writing course for it to be offered—but "students jumped at the speech class."<sup>12</sup>

Is it because they're all chomping at the bit to speak? No: we all know that some folks are terrified of public speaking. You've probably heard the old Seinfeld gag about how, at a funeral, most people would rather be the one in the coffin than the one giving the eulogy! No, it's because most students understand that the ability to be articulate is critical to their success.

But what does it mean to be articulate? Too many people think it's like the title of David Sedaris's book: "me talk pretty one day."<sup>13</sup> I'm sure you've had experiences like those of Deanna Dannels, whose colleagues in other disciplines wanted those of us in communication to "just fix those delivery problems!"<sup>14</sup> Well, *bless their hearts*.

Let me share a story about my very first NACC conference in 2004, when Linda Hobgood advised me *never* to use the term "skills" when referring to public speaking. Now, I have the utmost respect for her; I regard Linda and Marlene Preston as the godmothers of the communication centers movement. So I assiduously avoided using "skills," working off a crib sheet of other terms. It took

me literally years to really understand what she was saying (hey, I'm a slow learner!).

The term "skills" connotes a mechanical process, a technical expertise, a dexterity. The term "skills" connotes words as the clothes thoughts put on to go out in (to use a phrase I learned long ago, but can't remember from whom). The term "skills" connotes behavior that is added on, incidental, after the real work of thinking is completed.

So both those assumptions about how we can just "fix the delivery problems" and those connotations of the term "skills" reveal a simplistic, linear conception of communication. "Just add water" and you've got a good speech, right? Wrong!

In communication centers, our goal isn't better speeches, but better speakers: we know that effective communication is a process—a complex, dynamic, ongoing, challenging, frustrating, rewarding *process*.

Moreover, it's a complex process that is integrally related to *critical thinking*, because it requires audience analysis, research, evaluation and integration of perspectives and concepts, and making decisions about a range of options, including how to (as Wayne Booth put it) enact a rhetorical balance of bringing speaker, audience, and topic together.<sup>15</sup> That's why so many centers use the rhetorical canons to guide consultations: You can't solve problems of delivery without attention to invention, disposition, style, and memory!

Communication isn't (as they say in New Orleans) lagniappe, a nice little addition after the heavy lifting is done. No, communication IS the heavy lifting! In communication centers, we understand what Bob Scott called "rhetoric as epistemic":<sup>16</sup> that rhetoric is a way of knowing about the world, and an approach to establishing truth.

Now that sounds kinda high-falutin', so let me share a story from my major advisor at the University of Kansas, Dr. Wil Linkugel. "Kugel," as I affectionately called him, was a big baseball fan; he even wrote a book about it.<sup>17</sup> He told me about the 3 umpires. The first said, "I call 'em as they are." The second said, "I call 'em as I see 'em." The third said, "Whatever I call 'em, that's what they are." That, in a nutshell, is what Scott meant by rhetoric as epistemic: Whatever we call 'em, that's what they are to us.

Those of us working in communication centers appreciate Carbaugh and Buzzanell's point that "knowledge, facts, and perceptions" aren't "*prior to* communication" but "*social outcomes of* communication," that communication constitutes "a primary social process, . . . *the raw stuff of making* more than the *mere revealing* of society" (emphases added).<sup>18</sup>

If, as George Herbert Mead posits, we are “talked into humanity,”<sup>19</sup> then “rhetoric as a critical . . . activity” can and *should* be deeply connected to rhetoric “as a cultural practice.”<sup>20</sup> The students who visit our centers have the opportunity to better understand this richly complex process of oral communication as a process of *intellectual engagement*.

Moreover, the students at the center aren’t just those who are our clients: they’re also YOU! As *consultants* in the center, you appreciate the value of oral communication, in both senses of that phrase. Even more than the students who visit us, you really understand Shachtman when he says that to be articulate requires *both* “command of the language *and* the ability to take the perspective of the other person.”<sup>21</sup>

You know, as several of my tutors have told me, that effective mentoring is not a case of top-down instruction, but side-by-side co-creation, where you have to listen closely to what the student says in order to understand both the *content* meaning and the *relationship* meaning of the conversation. You demonstrate Aristotle’s concept of *ethos* in action, building your clients’ sense of your intelligence about the principles and practices of oral communication, your good will in wanting the best for them during their sessions, and your good moral character to establish the necessary trust for a cooperative relationship.

Moreover, you do this over and over again, with a wide variety of individuals, facing a range of challenges, under sometimes trying circumstances. You navigate those times when the clients really don’t want to be there, or want you to write their speech for them, or haven’t prepared, or have “issues” with their group members, or [to borrow a few bon mots] the ones who “know so little and know it so fluently,” or talk so fast they say things they haven’t thought of yet, or have nothing to say and say it endlessly,<sup>22</sup> or . . . or . . . or . . . Fill in the blank! You’ve *all* had these experiences, and more!

Think about it: Ward and Schwartzman found that communication center coaches learn to engage emotional intelligence, empathy, and trust for effective consultations.<sup>23</sup> And what do these three characteristics constitute? The qualities of *leaders*. So in the process of advising, you yourself grow, as a student, as a communicator, and as a person.

Now, it isn’t *entirely* rosy: There are those frustrating sessions to which I referred earlier; and my tutors tell me that once faculty members discover they’re on the Speaking Center staff, their oral communication is held to a higher standard! But because they are smart, they demonstrate a high work ethic, and they “play well with others,” they do indeed “measure up,” on and off campus.

## II. Careers

How many of you are seniors? What's uppermost in your mind? *Getting a job.* You and those you've mentored will take the value of oral communication well beyond campus and into your careers.

You won't be a bit surprised to learn that the National Communication Association argues that "the ability to explain and condense information is essential for any profession."<sup>24</sup> Biased we may be, but we're also right: Survey after survey reveals that the ability to communicate well ranks at or near the top of what employers seek. Every year, polls by the National Association of Colleges and Employers identify "communication ability and integrity as a job seeker's most important skills and qualities."<sup>25</sup> "What sets two equally qualified job candidates apart," NACE notes, "can be as simple as who [is] the better communica[tor]."<sup>26</sup> I would suggest that better communication is far from "simple."

Another survey of almost 500 companies "found that employers ranked communication abilities first among the desirable personal qualities of future employees."<sup>27</sup> This result echoes another investigation that found 89% of the employers surveyed ranked ability to communicate effectively, orally and in writing, as essential abilities for their workplaces.<sup>28</sup> I do have to wonder: what the heck are the other 11% thinking??

O'Hair and Eadie discovered that leaders at such organizations as the New York Times, FedEx, and GlaxoSmithKline say communication is vital to their organizations' success.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, in a recent assessment for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, nearly all those surveyed (93%) agree that "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major."<sup>30</sup> English or Econ, Classics or Chemistry, the ability to communicate, which entails both critical thinking and problem solving, will stand you in good stead.

Do you believe me yet? ☺

Well, that's the good news.

The bad news: survey after survey also reveals the ability to communicate well to be at or near the top of what employees lack. Recruiters report serious deficiencies in topic relevance, organization, clarity, and feedback--even though that's what they most want.<sup>31</sup> Norman Augustine, former Lockheed Martin CEO, argues that to bring our educational system out of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "we have to emphasize communication skills, [which we need for] the ability to work in teams and with people from different cultures."<sup>32</sup>

Having the ability to communicate effectively is especially important in the workplace given that you are likely to hold between 8 and 12 different jobs in your lifetime, not only in different organizations but in entirely different areas.<sup>33</sup>

But I'm an optimist, so let's go back to the good news: You and those you've tutored can make it out there, because of your ability to communicate. I am so proud of what our tutors accomplish not only on campus but also after graduation: They've gone to graduate school, veterinary school, nursing school, and seminary; they work in business and journalism, in education and politics and nonprofits (the last after winning the Ms. Wheelchair America contest, with her excellent speech, of course ☺). One works for the American Embassy in Peru; a Spanish major went to China to teach English for a year, and now works for the PGA; another became a counselor in Greece, because she could start a Speaking Center!

Directors, you have your own stories of what your peer consultants have gone on to do: I hope, if you haven't already, you'll share those stories with your current crew so they can see the wonderful opportunities that working in your com lab has opened up for them!

So appreciating the value of oral communication is important not only on campus, but also for careers—and in your community.

### **III. Community**

In our increasingly diverse society, in our increasingly global world, we need not only more creative, productive organizations, but also more creative, productive communities. Rod Hart, dean of the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas, suggests that “some people find it to be in their self-interest to keep others inarticulate.” So by his reckoning, those of us in communication centers are “fundamentally political animal[s].”<sup>34</sup>

What are the implications of communication centers for our communities? Hart posits that the decentralization of rhetorical power challenges “economic, social, and political” “power blocs.” He continues: “When I, as a citizen, learn to use the power of language successfully, I decrease my chances of being victimized by the entrenched, antediluvian forces in my society.”<sup>35</sup>

Those of us in communication centers understand, as a variety of scholars posit, that “communication is the ultimate people-making discipline,”<sup>36</sup> that “facts do not speak; they must be spoken for,”<sup>37</sup> that silence is *not* golden,<sup>38</sup> that the friends of public speaking are civil discourse and leadership,<sup>39</sup> that the terms “communication” and “community” share the same root: *to make common*.

We get Deb and Brian McGee's contention: that “communicative competencies . . . are not merely *consistent* with democratic practice; instead, the competencies

are the *enactment* of democracy” [emphases added].<sup>40</sup> So “effective speaking” is “itself a . . . power [and] knowledge necessary” for “democratic citizenship.”<sup>41</sup>

I hope you’re hearing echoes of my earlier point: that rhetoric is epistemic, that of the three umpires, the one who comprehends that “whatever I call ‘em, that’s what they are” is the one with the power.

## **Conclusion**

Let’s face it, Pinker nailed it: we are verbivores! ☺<sup>42</sup> But as verbivores, people too often indulge in junk food.

A colleague of mine observed that we want our students to articulate *thoughts*. Often, what they provide instead are *thoughtlets*. And all too frequently, they just blurt out *thinkies*.<sup>43</sup>

If we in communication centers embrace our calling to help students appreciate the value of oral communication on campus, in careers, and for communities, we can help them turn *thinkies* into *thoughtlets*, and *thoughtlets* into *thoughts*.

Thank you!

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<sup>1</sup> Isocrates, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, *Antidosis*.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased by Roderick P. Hart, “Why Communication? Why Education? Toward a Politics of Teaching,” *Communication Education*, 42 (April 1993), p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> “There appears to be an assumption among those not trained in our discipline that speaking and listening are innate skills, while reading and writing must be taught and nurtured.” –Roy Berko, “How Will Goals 2000 Affect Speech Communication?” *Spectra*, 30:5 (May 1994), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Communication in the General Education Curriculum: a Critical Necessity for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 2003), p. 9. The resource cites four essays:

- Allen, T. “Charting a Communication Pathway: Using Assessment to Guide Curriculum Development in a Re-vitalized General Education Plan,” *Communication Education*, 51 (2002), 26-39.
- W. Ford and Andrew D. Wolvin, “The Differential Impact of a Basic Communication Course on Perceived Communication Competencies in Class, Work, and Social Contexts,” *Communication Education*, 42 (1993), 215-23.
- H. Rose, A. Rancer, & K. Crannel, “The Impact of Basic Courses in Oral Interpretation and Public Speaking in Communication,” *Communication Reports*, 6:1 (1993), 54-60.
- A. Veerman, J. Andreiessen, & G. Kanselaar, “Collaborative Argument in Academic Education,” *Instructional Science*, 30 (2002), 156-86.



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<sup>5</sup> Reversed from Karen Kangas Dwyer, Com Ed, 47 (April 1998), 137: "The negative academic implications for students who experience high communication apprehension (HCAs), when compared to students who experience low communication apprehension (LCAs), have been well-documented: lower grade-point averages (GPA), lower scores on college entrance exams, more negative attitudes toward school, lower ratings by instructors, lower over-all classroom achievement, and higher college attrition rates"

<sup>6</sup> Eunhyoung L. Yook, "Communication Centers and Retention in Higher Education: Is There a Link?" Communication Centers and Oral Communication Programs in Higher Education: Advantages, Challenges, and New Directions, eds. Eunhyoung L. Yook and Wendy Atkins-Sayre (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> See University of Mary Washington College website.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest L. Boyer, past president of the Carnegie Foundation, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 73 (111).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Weiss, "Conference Maketh a Ready Person: A Preliminary Study," Conference on College Composition and Communication, Chicago, Illinois, March 1990

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Steinfatt, "Communication Across the Curriculum," Communication Quarterly, 34 (1986), p. 465; emphases added.

<sup>11</sup> John Morello, Keynote Address, National Association of Communication Centers conference, Mary Washington College, April 17, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Diana Middleton, "Students Struggle for Words," Wall Street Journal, March 3, 2011, B8.

<sup>13</sup> David Sedaris, Me Talk Pretty One Day (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Deanna P. Dannels, "Time to Speak Up: A Theoretical Framework of Situated Pedagogy and Practice for Communication in the Curriculum," Communication Education, 50 (April 2001), pp. 144-58. In "Why Communication? Why Education?" (p. 103), Rod Hart asserts a more nefarious perspective undergirding this approach: "certain members of the US educational establishment have long found it sensible to treat effective communication as something with which one is born, something which appears magically through maturation, something which derives osmotically from the passive reading of literature, or something which one comes to understand by listening attentively to one's rhetorical betters. Assumptions like these have brought aid and comfort to those in society who are fluent and hence influential."

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication, Vol. 14, No.3, Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, 1963: Toward a New Rhetoric. (October 1963), pp. 139-145.

<sup>16</sup> Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," Central States Speech Journal, 18,1967, 9-17] → Morello, "Comparing Speaking Across the Curriculum and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs," Com Ed 49 (Jan 2000)

<sup>17</sup> Wil A. Linkugel and Edward J. Pappas, They Tasted Glory: Among the Missing at the Baseball Hall of Fame (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Carbaugh, Donal and Patrice Buzzanell, "Reflections on Distinctive Qualities in Communication Research," in Distinctive Qualities in Communication Research, eds. Donal Carbaugh and Patrice Buzzanell (NY: Routledge, 2010), 108, 114 (106-16).

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- <sup>19</sup> George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 243.
- <sup>20</sup> Dilip P. Gaonkar, "The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science," Southern Communication Journal, 58 (1993), 259.
- <sup>21</sup> Tom Shachtman, "Learning to Speak," The Inarticulate Society: Eloquence and Culture in America (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 36.
- <sup>22</sup> Ellen Glasgow, American novelist; Caron Warner Lieber, American businesswoman, educator; and anon; in Carolyn Warner, The Last Word: A Treasury of Women's Quotes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), p. 268, 269, and 272.
- <sup>23</sup> Kiya Ward and Roy Schwartzman, "Building Interpersonal Relationships as a Key to Effective Speaking Center Consultations," Journal of Instructional Psychology, 36:4 (December 2009), pp. 363-72).
- <sup>24</sup> Communication in the General Education Curriculum: a Critical Necessity for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 2003), p. 8.
- <sup>25</sup> Press Release, National Association of Colleges and Employers, March 15, 2007, [www.naceweb.org/press/display.asp?year=2--7&prid=254](http://www.naceweb.org/press/display.asp?year=2--7&prid=254) (accessed May 7, 2007).
- <sup>26</sup> Press Release, National Association of Colleges and Employers, November 8, 2012, [www.naceweb.org/PrintFriendly.aspx?printpage=Press/Release](http://www.naceweb.org/PrintFriendly.aspx?printpage=Press/Release) (accessed January 6, 2013).
- <sup>27</sup> National Communication Association, "What is Communication?" [www.natcom.org](http://www.natcom.org), accessed 10/26/2005 (1998 data).
- <sup>28</sup> Hart Research Associates, "It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success," (April 10, 2013: The Association of American Colleges and Universities), <http://www.aacu.org/resources/liberaleducation/index.cfm> (accessed March 10, 2014).
- <sup>29</sup> Dan O'Hair and William F. Eadie, "Communication as an Idea and as an Ideal," 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication: A Reference Handbook, ed. William F. Eadie, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), pp. 3-11.
- <sup>30</sup> Hart Research Associates, It Takes More than a Major.
- <sup>31</sup> Fred M. Jablin, "Organizational Entry, Assimilation, and Disengagement/Exit," in Fred M. Jablin and Linda L. Putnam (eds), The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), pp 732-818; and Marshalita Sims Peterson, "Personnel Interviewers' Perceptions of the Importance and Adequacy of Applicants' Communication Skills," Communication Education, 46 (1997), 287-91.
- <sup>32</sup> Norman Augustine, quoted by Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe, "How to Bring Our Schools Out of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," Time, Dec. 18, 2006, 53.
- <sup>33</sup> Kathleen J. Turner, "'The Only Thing I've Learned': The Central Tenet of a Liberal Arts Education." Vital Speeches of the Day, LXX (June 1, 2004), pp. 500-502.
- <sup>34</sup> Hart, "Why Communication? Why Education?" p. 103.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>37</sup> David Zarefsky, "Four Senses of History," Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases, ed. Kathleen J. Turner (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Kevin Lowe, UNC-G Business keynote address to NACC, University of North Carolina-Greensboro, April 14, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Adrienne Christiansen, personal e-mail, June 17, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Brian R. McGee and Deborah Socha McGee, "Public Speaking Pedagogy and Democratic Citizenship," Controversia, 4 (2006), p. 164 (160-69).

<sup>41</sup> Brian R. McGee and Deborah Socha McGee, "Public Speaking Pedagogy and Democratic Citizenship," Controversia, 4 (2006), p. 166 (160-69).

<sup>42</sup> Steven Pinker, The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature (New York: Viking, 2007), p. 24.

<sup>43</sup> Dr. Alan Luhring, School of Music, University of Colorado-Boulder; personal conversation.