THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM IOWA CITY 52240

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George:

I'm sending along a copy of a preliminary statement I developed for our re-evaluation sessions here. I am convinced that we need some dispassionate advice from the outside. I find the whole thing painful, but most challenging.

If in the course of your very busy days you have a few minutes, I'd appreciate hearing some random thoughts you may have on the subject.

Thanks for listening.

Regards,

Dick Budd

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A Structural Approach to Communication Education

A Statement Prepared for the
Educational Policies Committee

School of Journalism
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by
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> The proper use of communication has been the chief secret of success of human societies in the past, and it will certainly be so in both the immediate and the more distant future.
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> It is only by proper communication that human societies retain the adherence of their members. Whether we like it or not, we can be sure that societies that use to the full the new techniques of communication, by better language and by better machines, will eventually replace those that do not.
>
> --J. Z. Young
> Biologist

I find it a most rewarding if not a somewhat frustrating task to set out my own thinking concerning communication education, particularly in drawing upon my own experiences with students, and the meaning that these experiences seem to hold for education in general. Such thinking can be, and was indeed, rewarding because in it seemed to lie a sense of pattern threading together a number of heretofore seemingly discrete events. At the same time, the task brought to the fore a number of uncomfortable questions which are difficult to leave unanswered, and yet, no simple answer is available for most of them. Indeed, the very nature of our inquiry will require that much of what I have to say be framed by way of questions.

Two such questions that come immediately to mind are: What is it we are doing in the School of Journalism? and, What is it we want to accomplish with our program? If the answer to these two questions is the same, then we need go no further. If, as I have done in my own way, we answer these two questions and find disagreement and contradiction between the answers we arrive at, then still another question must be posed: Why

do we continue to do what it is we are doing?

Perhaps I can best start by stating what I think our objectives should be and how we might go about accomplishing them, relating both to some current thinking about the educational process.

Our primary responsibility is to the student and through the student to society. Our primary objective is to give the student the ability to extend himself to full utilization of his intellectual powers. Part of this responsibility is teaching our students how to learn, how to expand the simplest case and to generalize, and how to transfer this ability to learn to other and more specific areas they will encounter once they are about the business of communicating for people to people (perhaps through other people). And not least of all, we should instill a sense of excitement about learning and discovery that will sustain students beyond the level of formal education.

More specifically, we should be providing our society with people educated in the science and art of communication to play key communication roles that 1) keep society informed on matters crucial to the maintenance of that society; 2) facilitate the maintenance of societal units through both intra-unit and inter-unit communication; 3) further affect the communication process through teaching and research. In this light, we should view communication as the study of human interaction at a variety of levels. We should be concerned with the study of a vast number of message systems, with media systems (formal and informal), with the roles people play in developing and influencing these systems and the affect these systems have on the society, and with the analysis of the effects of interaction among these systems, and all at a very general level.

By so doing, we will provide our students with a mastery of communication processes, thus equipping them to meet the increasing demands for communicators in the mass media, in industry, in government, in education, and in a host of areas "discovering" the need for communication specialists.

Further, we must not only recognize the need of other departments to expose their students to communication course work, but impress upon other areas of the University the importance of communication to their programs, and the importance of their programs to communication. Our proposal should have and will have, if it is properly drawn, University wide reverberations; it may perhaps, by comparison, stimulate other departments to re-examine their own programs.

Beyond this, any program that we develop should be constantly open to revision with evaluation on a continuing basis; it should stand as a model of the notions that we teach.

It is not a difficult matter to set out a set of objectives such as the ones above. The difficulty arises in attempting to give more shape

and substance to such a credo; without it, the listing is next to worthless.

The objective that I have advanced as the major one is not easily realized, but it also sets the challenge for our endeavor. Perhaps a central question in attacking this problem is "How will the things we are teaching serve the student in the future?" As Jerome S. Bruner puts it in The Process of Education,"Learning should not only take us somewhere; it should allow us later to go further more easily."

Those deeply concerned with the educational process, and who have wrestled with problems of learning over the past several years, seem to feel that the learning of structure rather than the simple mastery of facts and techniques is at the core of the educational process. Learning the general idea rather than the specifics forms the basis for transfer, recognizing individual problems as a special case of the general model. In short, this means we might consider designing a program that is true to the underlying structure of communication theory, rather than teaching specific tasks or skills without ever relating what it is we are teaching to the broader structure.

The present programs of most schools of journalism appear to violate the "teaching of structure" approach, and this is true, I think, because schools of journalism -- including our own -- were designed primarily to service the mass media of communication. We offer eight sequences, each tailored to produce a "working newspaperman," or a "working photographer," or a "working broadcaster," etc. These kinds of programs are predominantly input programs (achieved most normally by straight lecturing), and we are left to speculate about any relating that might or might not be going on in our students' heads.

Most certainly, this type of program serves well (or at least we think it does) as an advanced technical training program that produces a continuing supply of help for the mass media. It also, through the present structure of the program and through the ACEJ (which ensures the continuance of such programs), allows the media to exert considerable influence on the planning and maintaining of the curriculum. This situation helps us to maintain (or should anyway) amicable relations with the public media, which are of some benefit to our placement and intern programs and scholarship assistance.

But returning again to the major objective, our present program places the mass media, not the student, at the center of our educational program.

The case for teaching the fundamental structure of a subject is a strong one. A thorough understanding of the fundamentals of communication (the purposes and problems involved in human communication) makes the subject more understandable when we get around to teaching the more specialized techniques and problems of communication. Considerable evidence has been mounted to show that detail not placed in a structured pattern is easily

forgotten, which in turn places limitations on the student's ability to generalize that which he has learned to other problems he meets later. There should be an orderly progression of material that leads the student both upward and outward in a pattern which presents increasingly more complex subject matter, but at the same time allows him to draw upon less complex but similarly structured material presented earlier.

To state the case more simply, the approach is not concerned with the function of each separate element of the system presented in a relatively isolated manner, but the function of the structure as a whole, in which context the function of the parts takes on greater meaning.

If we can accept the evidence and the inferences that have been drawn from the evidence, it suggests some serious questions about our present approach to education, not only in the School of Journalism, but in the University as a whole.

All too often the pure mechanical aspects of a profession are substituted for more substantive content. For example, in journalism we appear to offer a large number of courses concerned with the actual production of messages, in some way hoping that enclosed within these "pods" of technical knowledge is to be found the more substantive concepts dealing with the problems of human communication. It would seem to me that a program based on giving the students a thorough understanding of the communication process could be developed without impinging upon (and perhaps even sharpening) the learning of techniques and the application of technology.

Helping the student to grasp the underlying structure of a subject means more than simply "telling" him about theory. I have found in my own teaching experience that such a procedure does indeed produce the "verbal glibness" that Bruner warns against. We have all heard of or have known (or have experienced ourselves) cases where students seemingly "understand" an idea, but don't have the vaguest notion how to apply it. At the same time, a good number of so-called "drills" requiring considerable memorization have little or nothing to do with understanding.

The solution seems to lie in a method of exercise which is likely to give students intelligent insight into and a mastery over the subject matter. This seems to suggest a wide range of experiences and experimentation with a number of communication forms and formats. George Gallup, for one, is a strong advocate of reading as a means of becoming familiar with different approaches. Our students should do considerably more writing than they do, and we should not restrict these writing experiences to the "straight news" (or variations thereof) style. We should encourage experimentation. An example of what I mean can be provided from my own experience with a beginning reporting course I taught last summer. Among other approaches, I asked the class to write a minimum of 500 words about a pop bottle which I had given to each student. But while we are about extending their range of experience with communication forms, we must do so with the purpose of continually relating what we are doing to the basic structure.

As was stated earlier, one of the important ingredients in the process of education is the "sense of excitement about discovery." As Bruner puts it, "discovery of regularities of previous unrecognized relations and similarities between ideas, with a resulting sense of self confidence of one's own abilities." There appears to be a powerful impact accompanying the learning or "discovery" of certain principles by one's self.

I think we have all taken note and have been considerably disturbed by the fact that modern students, for the most part, are passive participants in the educational process. They appear to be motivated not through a love of learning, but by the achieving of "grades" and a "degree" (and in many cases by the fear of not obtaining a "passing grade"). We appear to be in an age of "spectatorship." We absorb passively in most areas of modern life, from the frozen "complete" dinner to the mass media to the classroom. Rather than live with this situation as an uncomfortable fact of life, we must somehow arouse the interest of our students in the process of learning by making learning satisfying and fun.

This means more than the simple use of visual aids and gimmicks to hold interest on a passing basis. We need to do more than provide a brief vicarious experience. We need devices that will help the student grasp the underlying structure of communication. Again, the involvement of the student in these structure-oriented devices seems important. An example of such an approach, which I have used elsewhere, is the rumor clinic, where the process character of communication is implicit. We can also make good use of role playing for teaching and involving students. W. Phillip Davidson has proposed a "public opinion game," which involves students and clearly shows some of the basic principles and processes involved in opinion formation. Another effective method may be allowing brighter student to "teach" certain segments of the course work. Another possibility is the creation of our own teaching aids, which could in turn serve several functions. Such aids would be to the point, since many current teaching aids only partially fulfill our needs, but we take the whole package to get the parts we want. Another advantage is that students experimenting in forms of communication (pictorial, graphic, etc.) could be responsible for creating current teaching aids (which both reflect and reinforce the basic structure of communication) for use in teaching in other areas.

Closely allied with these aids to teaching is the order of presentation of material and the development of learning "episodes" (acquisition, transformation, evaluation, feedback) which allows our students to not only deal with new information, but to go beyond it. Presentation can become a valuable teaching aid and can also help to spark the excitement we seek.

I have advanced only a few relatively simple (and perhaps naive) ideas for building a fervency for learning. But, I think, we need as a faculty to be exposed to some deeper insights of the learning process. I think we should

seek the consultation and advice of people who have spent considerable time researching some of the problems we face. There are persons both on our own campus and from other universities whose help we should solicit. I think if we do not ask for help, we run the risk of missing the mark in developing our program, which would not really put us any farther along than we are right now.

I am not suggesting that we abdicate the major responsibility for restructuring our own program, but I do think that, to some degree, we make ourselves be unduly influenced by the structure of the program as it now exists. While it is true that in many of our current courses we are presenting substantive material along with techniques, we are doing so without a clear overriding goal. I think no amount of bending of the current structure will make it do what is was never intended to do. Nor should we be led into the trap of merely combining and renaming courses to make them reflect what we are actually teaching. Something more than gaining "academic respectability" should guide whatever direction we elect to take.

As educators, I think the frustration of stagnation touches us all from time to time. It carries with it the uneasy feeling that somehow as educated men we have failed to fulfill our obligations, and at the same time a self-denial of the benefits and the satisfaction to be found in scholarship. We somehow hope that the process of evolution will suffice to carry our work forward, and in the process have sterilized the educational experience, not only for ourselves, but for our students. A stagnant program not only fails to interest bright students, but holds no appeal for the teacher-scholar. Under those circumstances, the educator has two courses of action: stagnate with the program, or search for intellectual satisfaction elsewhere. We have seen both happen in the academic world, and both courses of action are detrimental to the educational system. Such action has further encouraged the so-called "split" between theorist and teacher (which is in itself a contradiction of education). By allowing such conditions to obtain, we have not realized the benefits that can come from joining the efforts of theory, research, practice and teaching, and our programs show it. Any new program we develop must emphasize integration of these areas, so that the teacher can better utilize the information that is available to him. This means presenting new theory and research findings in a format that can be incorporated in his teaching.

Perhaps the easiest and yet most evasive solution to our problem is a program which insists upon excellence. We have, for example, been concerned about the quality of students entering our present program. The quality of the student in no small manner affects the quality of our teaching (sort of a mutual infusion) which in turn affects the quality of the students who will be drawn into our program. In this regard, our interests might be served not by a substantial number of students, but by a number of substantial students. I think that once we begin to realize these goals, the attraction of quality faculty will follow. At the same time, we should become more demanding in faculty recruitment, less willing to take only "the best we can get."

We might also consider leaving some of our faculty positions open so as to make greater use of visiting professors to provide the infusion of new ideas, not only for the intellectual health of our students, but for the stimulation of our faculty as well. A program of guest lecturers on a continuing basis--preferably from areas other than our own--would serve a similar function.

We need also to increase the interaction among our own faculty in matters of basic concern to our academic program. To this end, we have to have more team teaching of courses, which also serves the function of increasing faculty-student interaction in the classroom. By team teaching, I do not mean merely alternating the teaching responsibility, but the use of more than one instructor in the same class at the same time.

Another approach that would tend to bring us closer to our students and provide a means of keeping ourselves attuned to a process program is that of what I will call "spot seminars." Taken under some form of special projects arrangement, these seminars could be convened at any time to discuss current and crucial issues on an intensified (all-day, two-day) basis. Under a team teaching arrangement, such courses would require the students to bring into focus and make application of what they had learned in terms of a specific problem, as it relates to communication. It seems to me that such an experience would also be a stimulating experience for the faculty staff.

A prerequisite to communicating knowledge is a thorough understanding of the material being communicated. Our own faculty meetings could take on more the form of seminars in which we concern ourselves with problems in communication and problems in communicating about communication, integration and process, mental experimentation, hypothesizing and challenging, vision and revision, increasing our own mastery of the material we are presenting. I am saying that we should not only teach our students, but teach each other; "teaching is a superb way of learning." Such sessions would not take us away from the other important things that we must be about, because the time thus spent would be about the more important things, and perhaps do considerable to draw the more important things into our teaching.

I think that the study of communication is rapidly emerging as a major discipline which will eventually embody a number of things presently being taught in a variety of other programs. A number of universities have already become aware of these needs, and have moved swiftly to fill them. The demand for communication specialists is no longer restricted to the public media. In fact, it is quite probable that other markets combined now employ more communication and journalism graduates than do the mass media. Beyond this, it is difficult to think of many areas of study in the University where one of the basic requirements for professional success does not depend upon some knowledge of the communication process. Somehow, some way, these demands are going to have to be met. I do not think we can meet these increasing needs by "tacking on" an additional course here and there. This tacking on process has not been very successful in the past, and is quite likely partially responsible for the necessity of papers such as this one.

It is difficult for me to imagine at this juncture how we can avoid making significant changes in our program from the undergraduate level on through the Ph.D. And since there appears never to be a best time for change, I suggest that we will never have a better opportunity. I also think that we will achieve little by thinking little; I am of the opinion that we ought to "pour it on."

I have not, obviously, made suggestions for specific courses or patterns of courses, for to do so would not only be premature at this stage, but for the most part would represent little more than uninformed guesses. Nor have I said all that there is to be said about communication education. For example, I am aware that some provision must be made, preferably in a concentrated period near the end of the program, for students to acquire the specialized tools required for entering a special field. I believe, however, that this job will be less tedious for both faculty and student because of what has gone before. I am sure, however, that if we do decide to move in new directions, whatever we do we must embark upon it on an experimental basis.

It may very well be that the Educational Policies Committee will find the current program adequate and purposeful, in which case I strongly urge the committee to incorporate as part of its report that a department of communication be established on the University of Iowa campus to meet the need outlined in this paper.

I cannot, however, shake the feeling that we are standing on the brink of one of the most exciting revolutions in modern education, and that the study of communication will play one of the most significant roles in that revolution. I opened this paper with a quote from J. Z. Young's Doubt and Certainty in Science. Typically British, he indulges himself in understatement.

There seem to be several things implied in the pursuit of excellence in education, not the least of which is the role we ourselves must play in the process. Such a program will take a considerable amount of energy, will challenge our creativity, will tax our ingenuity, and will test our devotion. It will demand a great deal from every faculty member by way of research and constant revision of content and approach, for such a program will rapidly produce students who will be able to challenge our own intellects on an equal footing. The success of such a program will hinge entirely upon the degree to which we are serious about education and the degree to which we are willing to invest our time, our talent and our efforts. At the same time, I am equally certain that we ourselves will experience the exhilaration that must come with such an experiment.