The Dean's Speech:
Finding Our Voice through Intentional Communication*

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I n the 2011 Oscar winning film, *The King's Speech*, when Lionel the speech therapist asks why he should bother to listen to what the King has to say, King George the sixth who struggles with a debilitating stutter, declares, "I have a voice!" He is not only speaking of overcoming his speech impediment, but becoming a fully functioning and respected leader. He knows that words matter! What we say and *how* we say it constitutes us as professionals… as humans in society.

I am a public speaking teacher, so I can relate to Lionel, but it is the plight of the King himself that inspired the title of *this* speech. One does not have to struggle with an actual speech impediment to have trouble finding one's voice. A Dean only has to have his or her ideas shot down once in Provost's council to begin to struggle with the thoughts, "could I have presented those ideas differently? Did the Provost not listen to what I was really trying to say? Should I just keep quiet in the future?"

In this short time I want to explore a premise that is easy to appreciate as true, but much harder to put into action everyday when we need it most: Strategic and intentional communication is central to everything we do as Deans. We tend to recognize when, "there is a communication problem," "when communication 'breaks down'" and when there "just was a lack of communication." However, if your experience is like mine most the time when these observations or pronouncements are made they are delivered as if they were a law of physics or a biological fact. "communication broke down, nothing to do about it now!"

At the very heart of the matter I define communication as all the dynamic processes humans use in symbolic interaction with one another including all cultural, interpersonal, group, rhetorical, technological and mass mediated dimensions.

Finding one's voice goes far beyond giving confident prepared remarks and sharing information. Here are many, but certainly not all of, the ways I see myself positioned in communication practice everyday as Dean:

- Interpersonal interactions and relationships with the Provost, President, Vice Presidents, Chairs, faculty members, staff and students;
- managing group dynamics on committees
- acknowledging vertical and horizontal power relationships in the organization;
- managing e-mails (knowing what to leave in and what to leave out); circumventing other's communication problems, such as the faculty member who has already put way too much in an e-mail and is on the verge of sending it to the entire division, cc'd to the president;
- active listening and strategic talking when conducting meetings, large and small;
- creating and maintaining a media and marketing presence for my college;
- using rhetoric to persuade constituencies of the worthiness of liberal Arts and Sciences;
- Developing alumni relationships;
- making the best use of new information technologies and understanding the technological environment of our students;
- promoting my faculty's achievements at strategic moments;
- giving planned and unplanned remarks in public;
- and setting a tone and creating a culture for the college.

In the outstanding academic satire film "Wonderboys," about an aging English Professor struggling to produce his follow-up book and discovering a new sense of worth and vitality through a morose but talented student in his class, the professor's young female student is found asleep on top of the his 2,000 pg manuscript. She says to him, "Grady, you know how you always tell us that as writers we need to make choices? It seems like you didn't make any." I felt a bit like Grady when I began to write this address. I have studied human communication my entire career in its varied facets. How in the world was I going to choose what things about communication I wanted to impart to CCAS Deans?

So I made some choices about what I will talk about: First, words matter. . .our metaphors shape our realities. Second, active listening and strategic talking are two sides of the same coin. And, third, understanding the communication environment of our students may be more important *now*, than in any other time in the past.

I am going to present these ideas in 3 yoga poses… not really. I just think Patricia Zohn's book, *My Life in 23 Yoga Poses,* has a great title.

Seriously, I want you to consider that by being focused on communication at the center, and implementing some intentional and strategic communication constructs, we as Deans can be more effective, more persuasive and more readily find our voice in our colleges, universities, our states or even nationally.

THEME NUMBER ONE: Words matter-our metaphors shape our realities.

We all agree with employers that the primary transferable skills students need when they graduate are oral and written communication skills. Yet we tacitly or implicitly denigrate the worth of such skills. We relegate them to that soft and fluffy realm of Social Science. We make jokes that athletes and beauty queens get their degrees in communication and it's an easy major that demands very little math. Because we are in Higher Ed I think much of this perception of the communication field often spills over into how we see the importance of communication as administrators.

I was speaking with our CIO a while back and he was describing his dissertation research. He interviewed a large number of higher education administrators in several Midwest universities to find out what they most wanted from their IT services. He was surprised to find, but I was not, that they really cared very little about choosing hardware, software or helping to plan the structure of IT, what they really wanted was better and more respectful communication between IT and them and their staff.

The words we choose and the words we think in constitute our cultural realities. In Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Professor Dumbledore says: "words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury and remedying it." Of course this well placed line was J.K. Rowling's homage to the magic she had crafted with the Harry Potter book and film series, but it is true, words can *lift*, words can *maim*, words can *heal* and words can *kill*.

As a concrete example, this clash over words and their meanings played out center stage recently in my Deaning experience.
The backdrop: For one hundred years The Eastern Washington University mascot was the *Savages*. In the 1980s the university changed it to the Eagles. Further, they eradicated any trace of the name Savages or the degrading cartoon of an American Indian that accompanied it from campus, including sanding the image off of hundreds of bricks in front of the stadium.

At a very recent Chairs and Directors meeting, the Chair of Military Science announced that they had named the battalion by the football field the Savage Eagle battalion, in honor of those ROTC alums who still relate strongly to the mascot, *Savages*. At the mention of these words the Director of the American Indian Studies program and the Chicano Education program went into action. "Didn't he know that this is a disrespectful and derogatory term to Native Americans? Did he run this by anybody before making a sign and posting it by the football field?"

The Military Science Chair got defensive. He said his only intention was to wed tradition with the present for the ROTC alums. Savage describes the Eagles, it has nothing to do with Native Americans. The next day I called up the Military Science Chair and explained some basic communication theory to him. You can't control the meaning of certain words, no matter what your intentions. Many times the meaning of certain words are contested and need to be negotiated. At Eastern the word *Savage* or *Savages* signifies disrespect to Native Americans no matter what one intends otherwise.

Then, in order to get inside the Chair's own metaphor I said, "You can't win this battle. This is a war of words and their meaning. It doesn't matter that you got the "all clear" from athletics or that no one else has yet complained about the sign. We are committed to being a culturally sensitive university and if two of our campus leaders find it culturally insensitive we are going to act on that. You have to take down the sign." The Military Science Chair was dissatisfied and a bit hurt that his good intentions could be taken so wrong.

When I called up the Director of the American Indian Studies program she was very pleased that she had been heard and that action had been taken. She did share with me that the Native students were meeting that afternoon at her request and they were going to discuss what actions they should take to protest the sign. No doubt, the local papers would have been a clear choice as well as a barrage of communications to the President's office. She said that would no longer be necessary.

Communication scholar Brenda Dervin reminds us that verbing gets you further than nouning. What she means is that when we assign states and traits to human interaction we fail to appreciate the fluid and transactional nature of human communicating. You may think of your Physics Chair as a rigid, closed minded, argumentative ideologue (for you those are his states and traits). An alternative is to think of him as a person who seems to be stopped from thinking more broadly about issues. He seems to be threatened by new ideas, but on the positive side he is willing to vocalize his opinions in front of the group.

When you start to see the Physics Chair's communicating in these verbing terms it is much easier to think through strategies to make your communication with him better and more useful to the entire group. When you think of him as a bundle of undesirable traits, (nouns) you may be more likely just to write him off as undesirable to work with, making him in turn even *more* rigid and your communication with him even more unproductive.

Let's talk about metaphors.
One way social theorists interpret and explain societies is to deconstruct the overarching metaphors that direct behavior. Researchers frequently engage in metaphorical thinking as they conceptualize, understand, and structure inquiry of new phenomena. The most commonly used metaphors compare societies to biological systems; machines; wars; legal codes; economic markets; games; and theatre. Understanding what metaphors are at work in the overlapping organizations we work in is imperative to our flexibility and adaptation to changing situations.

For example, often in development offices the dominant metaphor is the game, or more specifically, sports. When setting up meetings for me with alums, my development director is always going to "tee it up" for me. (now that I play golf myself I realize that teeing it up is the easiest part! How 'bout you drive it 300 yards into the fairway for me!) Development officers are always trying to "hit one out of the park," or trying for a "line drive down the middle." These are all positive things and I applaud the optimism, however the insider sports metaphor is not one that always resonates with faculty members, humanities donors or women, for example. Our language in metaphor has the ability to include and exclude and in the game of fundraising and friend-raising can we really afford to exclude anyone?

Further, since at least 2008 those of us at state institutions have been living out a metaphorical war with our Governors and State legislators over scarce and shrinking resources. We have been "besieged" by freezes on hiring, raises and travel. We have all had to "hunker down" and do more with less. Once the President, Provost or deans are testifying in front of the legislature some of these war metaphors remain useful and appropriate. For example, the President might explain that our ability to deliver quality education will be "decimated" by a 20% budget cut.

Once we find ourselves talking with legislators in the hallway of the state capital, however, one needs to speak softly and lose the big stick. The metaphor shifts. We need to be persuasive that we are all on one team, pulling for the good of all the people in the state. Everyone has his or her position to play and if we all pull together we will get through these tough times even stronger.

In times of war we think of the need to make Draconian cuts and sacrifices. Rhetorically we let those in the university know that there may be very harsh decisions soon to come. Then we are positioned both rhetorically and behaviorally to make those extreme

changes. If not used very carefully war metaphors can do the following things:
First, the war metaphor moves us to an "us" vs. "them" situation, evacuating possible middle ground and shades of gray. For example, to quote a famous politician, "you are either with us or you are with the terrorists." In the film Dead Poets Society Robin Williams, as the teacher, declares that this is a war for students' hearts and minds against armies of academics who wish to measure poetry.

Second, the war metaphor can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophesy. . . if we believe ourselves to be in a war, we prepare for it and this makes the war more likely. Whenever we see others we work with as the enemy, we are mentally preparing for war. At my university a senior faculty member has been at war with the Chair for years. Although the Chair has tried to operate in alternative metaphors and frameworks, sticking within the war metaphor allows the faculty member to see his harsh words and unbendable stubbornness as correct and indeed the *only* course of action.

THEME NUMBER TWO:
Active listening and strategic talking are two sides of the same coin.
A general rule of thumb is that effective, benevolent leaders listen more than they speak. To truly listen to another person takes mental discipline. It is akin to meditation in that when you are truly listening to another you are actively trying to keep out extraneous thoughts and noise to focus on what the other is saying and how they are saying it.

If you are plotting your next clever comment the entire time the other person is talking, you are not engaged in active listening. Active listening is not a competitive sport, it is an act of empathy. Only if you have truly heard the other person can you effectively communicate with them. When you talk over another person's words you are engaged in competitive overlapping speech, not communication.

As Deans we attend and run a heck of a lot of meetings.
When leading a group in information sharing and discussion, such as Chairs and Directors meetings or CCAS board meetings, for example, I like to think of the experience as akin to conducting an orchestra or choreographing a dance (there are those metaphors again!). To do it well takes all the best active listening and strategic talking skills you have! You have to be listening to the substance of the conversation and participating in a meta-language in your head:

On one level the Biology Chair just said there should be a policy to mandate classes meet during the final exam period and the Sociology Chair said faculty have the right not to meet with students during final exam week if they have them working on an alternative assignment.

While synthesizing what they are saying you need to be keeping track of the following: Who has talked too long? Who had input that makes the most sense so you can come back to it? Who has gone off on a tangent and needs to be reigned in? Has enough time already been spent on this topic? Did everyone who wanted to speak get to? Did I manage to keep the exchange respectful? and so on.

An active listening technique we have all learned somewhere along the way is to say back to the person or group we are interacting with "what I hear you saying is…."
Some of you think this technique cliché. But regardless of the phrasing you choose I argue that it is still one of most effective communication tools you have! People feel incredibly

respected when you can restate to them what has been said to you. This technique also shows that you are doing your best to hear them, but like all humans, you may have gotten it wrong, so here is an opportunity to correct any mis-hearing that can lead to mis-understanding. From that base you are in a position to strategically talk, even if you choose to disagree with what you have heard, you offer your next comments in the context of respect and understanding, to the greatest extent possible.

What I'm talking about is *dialogue*, another term we think we all know, but most likely do not examine closely in our busy lives. It is the willingness to drop one's assumptions and view the world through the eyes of others. Everything we do as Deans often feels so politicized it is probably hard to imagine letting your guard down this much, however this kind of communication creates a culture of dignified respect. This type of dialogue also requires imagination, procedural rigor and sensitivity. It does not necessarily entail agreement or resolution. Differences, divergences and oppositions are to be expected in human interaction. A good debate can be delightful.

We learn how to do this kind of dialogic communication through our educational and teaching experiences. As Deans we should bring every tool we have collected along the way to bear on our work, but too often we check the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge we have collected as professors at the door and do not bring them to bear on our work as administrators! I encourage you to bring all you know and have learned to running meetings and motivating groups.

At each CCAS board meeting this year I brought in something different for the board members to "play with" at their seats while we did our business.

At the January meeting I brought rubber bendy things, in April I brought giant pipe-cleaners and in July I brought brightly colored Playdough and molding clay. I'm sure in January many thought it was frivolous and silly. Why did I think it was important to have objects to play with at all the board meetings? Because I wanted to employ what I had learned in psychology, human development, children's studies and organizational communication: active hands make creative thoughts. An inactive body can lead to dull, distracted minds. When you have to sit in a chair for hours to accomplish a high level cognitive task, you need something that will stimulate your creative brain center without taking you clear off the task at hand. We had very productive meetings this year and we had no trouble staying within our allotted time frames. Another benefit was we didn't feel all stiff and sore and tired at the end of sessions.

THEME NUMBER THREE:
Considering the current communication environment of our students

When we think about the latest new information technology cycle we are in, dominated by social media, smart phones and the Apple i-universe (Steve Jobs RIP), a good many communication scholars will say this is *just the next cycle*. However, if you are a parent of preteens or teens and if you are a professor in the classroom, the move to the social media world feels ever more like a paradigm shift.

One way we consistently choose to understand the influence of new information technologies is to point to a current generation of students, like the Beloit College mindset list each year that reminds us that the incoming Freshman class were born in 1993, they have never "rolled down" a car window, and the world wide web has been an on-line tool ever since they were born. I do not think it enough to try to understand the

current social media and i-universe through just the generational lens. Some things are the same, but many are fundamentally different.

High schools don't know whether to block or embrace smart phones, i-pads, Twitter or Facebook accounts. In the same USA Today edition from the summer of 2011, two contrasting articles ran that epitomize the confusion: the first described how high schools in Florida and New York had decided to use blocking software to filter out sites with pornographic or violent content. However, the teachers find that it also blocks key educational opportunities and sites for National Geographic, Flickr and Skype. The second article described how a NJ Principal has fully embraced social media as a learning tool. He and his teachers use Facebook to communicate with students and parents, and in the classroom teachers routinely ask the students to power *up* their cell phones to respond to classroom polls and quizzes. "rather than ban cell phones, the principal considers them 'mobile learning devices.'"

I don't want to get too far into how the learning is different in the classroom now than in the past, but as Deans we cannot overlook the fact that "reaching these students" *is* different. We never did win the battle to get all our students to sign up for and use official university e-mail-accounts… and now they don't use e-mail! Our students consider e-mail their parents' mode of communication. Now, commenting, rumoring, slandering, news perusing and entertainment are all done through Facebook. For my daughters Facebook, texting and YouTube are the portals to everything they want and need in communications. They use Google and Wikipedia for school work, but that is not their primary cyber-environment.

Social media is where *your* communications have to be too.

Web pages used to be the portals by which we could be assured that constituents could seek out our content-now you need to be "found" and "liked" on Facebook and "followed" on Twitter. Notice the metaphors. The information superhighway metaphor was a product of the 1990s. It encouraged us to think of the internet as a way to get from point A to point B as fast as we could, stopping when and where we needed to. It was a solitary journey on our personal computer. Problems were framed accordingly. Bandwidth would allow more traffic on the road. We had to make sure there were enough onramps for access, and so on. Ultimately, the metaphor invited us to think about the internet not in terms of communication but in terms of economic growth.

By contrast, the related metaphor of cyberspace and "sites" makes us think of the internet as an environment where communication actually takes place. This then leads us to ask questions about the *quality* of our interactions in cyberspace. How can the site or environment be designed in such a way that communication can be enhanced? Although Facebook and Twitter were the brainchildren of hip programmers and investors, so were a thousand other media products. It is their pattern of *adoption* that I find most fascinating. Why Facebook and Twitter are so widely used and adopted, circles back to the most basic of human social desires: to connect, to communicate, to be heard, to have voice and to listen! To be part of something bigger than ourselves… to *not be alone*.
In the environment of Facebook and Twitter we "find", we are "found", we "follow" we are "followed," we Tweet, we IM, we be-friend and we de-friend. Much like the playground. "Red Rover, Red Rover send Billy right over"

Social media such as Twitter offers us an alternative epistemology, while at the same time showing up an older communication theory of media effects: influence is yielded

by opinion leaders. Those with the most followers on Twitter have the potential to wield influence and quickly disseminate information, albeit unfiltered, unedited and non-reviewed. In a May 6, 2011 article on the blog *SocialFlow,* they show pictorially what a rumor exchange on Twitter "looks like." In this case they were tracking the speculation about Osama Bin Laden's death. The exchange had emerged as informed speculation on Twitter a full hour before any formal announcements were made. At *SocialFlow* they analyzed 14.8 million public Tweets sent in the hour between the announcement that there would be an emergency Presidential press conference and the official White House announcement.

When seen visually, the flow of Tweets appear not like webs at all, but like constellations in a night sky. The opinion leaders with thousands of followers appear as supernovas with thousands of planets in their orbit, while connected users with less followers are like small stars orbited by a smaller group of planets. The spread of rumors and speculation on Twitter is exponential and viral. In my mind this is what makes the environment an alternative epistemology from the information technologies that have come before it and if we do not recognize that this is *the* communication reality of our students we will have greater difficulty in knowing how to reach them or how to teach them.

One extremely savvy i-Pad advertisement captures it perfectly: it says,
"We'll never stop sharing our memories or getting lost in a good book. We'll always cook dinner and cheer for our favorite team. We'll still go to meetings, make home movies and learn new things. But how we do all this will never be the same."
The take-away is, the medium is not the *whole* message. Human beings will always seek out ways to connect to others and want to hold on to the past, however, if you don't keep up with technology changes, you may be left behind and left *alone.* What we have to teach our students may be much the same as before, but the ways we reach them and effectively connect with them may very well never be the same.

Our challenge as Deans is to find frameworks for situating this linked, social media ecology that fit with our mission as universities, and Arts and Sciences in particular. While this might require a fundamental rethinking of pedagogy and marketing, it does not mean that education must all migrate entirely on-line or even that we need to go chasing after every new technology that comes along. Instead, administrators and faculty need to focus on how to leverage the social media environment that our students so readily embrace, in order to produce new educational environments that are: open, collaborative, linked, distributed, engaging and get students connected to educators, information, knowledge, learning and each other.

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I didn't thank some people who have made this a very special and fulfilling year for me. I so admire the CCAS board. They work so hard and they are such great people and I count you all as valued colleagues and friends. I want to thank Anne-Marie McCartan for all she does for CCAS with such great finesse and intelligence and care. A huge thank you goes out to John Demke from Media and Marketing at Eastern Washington University for creating and producing the opening video with me. I am grateful to my husband Peter for all his support and insight on how one really *talks* about communication. And finally I have colleagues in CCAS who I count among my most special of friends. You know who you are.

I would also be remiss if I didn't leave you with at least one public speaking tip to improve *The Dean's Speech*. How about the napkin speech? When surprised at an event

by an invitation to speak, (an event where you had hoped just to have a glass of wine and scarf down some reception food) do the following: go ahead and grab that food because you will need the napkin, in fact grab an extra napkin. While trying to seem as if you are actively listening to the other fascinating people at your table, jot down the following key words on the napkin: something to introduce your remarks, 3 key points and a conclusion. There are exceptions to every rule. This is one of those moments where I give you full permission not to be really actively listening to others at the table, because you in fact need to be preparing to save your own butt from totally bombing in front of an audience-impromptu. To repeat: don't listen actively, save own butt!

And there is one more secret to professional public speaking that I want to share with you: when preparing to speak it is very important to do some visualization. Visualize the room, the audience, the podium and most importantly, visualize yourself doing well and the warm fulfilled feeling you will have when you leave the stage.I visualized that I would ride out here on a Palomino horse over a path of rose petals to thunderous applause and a standing ovation—so thanks a lot!!

In parting, remember that,

The faculty's role is to think for the college,

The president's role is to speak for the college.

The dean's role is to keep the faculty from speaking and the president from thinking

Seriously… go forth… find your voice.
You've been a great audience!
I'll be here all weekend!