

**Cultivating Citizen Scholars and Engaged Organizational Communication
Scholarship in Nebraska**

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Like I suspect many of you, I was drawn to the study of organizational communication, in part, because of several mysterious and puzzling encounters with organizations and the belief that communication could be approached in ways that produced growth, greater fairness and less suffering. And, I haven't been disappointed, at least in theory. Believing that organizational communication can make a meaningful difference continues to animate my teaching, thinking and writing although I have become more discerning and less certain about the kind of difference I would like it to make. For me, the numerous and fragmenting demands of academic life have sometimes made it difficult to live and work up to the ideal of making a difference. Imagining and cultivating the practice of engaged organizational communication scholarship helps me remember what drew me to this work in the first place and creates space to think of myself as both "scholar" and "citizen".

As far as I know, there is little history of what I think of as engaged organizational communication scholarship in Nebraska. That is not to say that communication scholars de-value or actively avoid developing connections with organizations in our local communities. Several of my colleagues and I participate in a supervisory certificate program offered by the College of Business Administration, planning and conducting workshops on a variety of subjects including organizational communication, customer service, and team-building. Developed and offered in such a context, short skills-based workshops such as these understandably tend to take as their starting point the organization's interests, over-emphasizing the capacity of communication to control and under-emphasizing

its capacity to de-stabilize and transform. While there may be a place for such workshops, organizational communication scholarship becomes more meaningfully engaged and engaging when it takes into account multiple interests and draws upon more socially sophisticated understandings of communication. In a small way, for me this has meant organizing my workshop on “creating and managing teams” around the importance of balancing the tensions between dissensus and consensus in small group communication. Such a shift, though subtle, re-positions difference and disagreement as equal in importance to similarity and agreement, and as interrelated processes that arise together. And because the expression of both disagreement and agreement are important not just to building teams, but to building neighborhoods and communities, my identity as “citizen scholar” is reassured knowing that this workshop might make a difference in how participants approach agreement and disagreement across multiple spheres of their lives. But, I believe we can go further.

Even though it has yet to be realized, the potential for engaged organizational communication scholarship in this state is great. Seemingly intractable conflicts regularly arise between Sudanese Muslim employees and white, Christian supervisors in the Swift meat-packing plant in Grand Island. Groups of local environmental activists do not hesitate to challenge decisions, practices and policies they view as threats to the natural habitats of rare shore birds and insects. The state has been involved in a variety of on-going disputes with ranchers and farmers as well as with other states over water use and regulation. Engaged organizational communication scholarship could make a difference in how these situations are

understood and acted upon, strengthening the state's capacity for collective deliberation and just action, and enriching our theoretical ideas and scholarship. In the absence of a strong presence or history of engagement, where do we begin?

Preparing the Ground and Planting Seeds

One way to prepare the ground for the growth of engaged communication scholarship and "citizen scholars" is to position such activity as a central organizing principle in the Departmental mission. During a recent academic program review, Dave Seibold was very helpful in talking this idea over with our faculty. After much discussion, we arrived at "Communication, Collaboration and Community" as a unifying theme. It appears in our departmental mission statement, regularly guides our strategic planning and legitimates the use of time devoted to making engaged scholarship a priority.

A second way to prepare for greater engagement as "citizen scholars" is to simply pay attention to consequential social, economic and environmental issues as they arise across the state. As I do, I weave these into the undergraduate and graduate courses I teach. The dispute between Muslim employees and Christian supervisors has become a case example in my undergraduate organizational communication courses, my undergraduate conflict management course and my introductory graduate level organizational communication course. Most recently, one of our graduate students adopted the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2001; hooks, 1994) to guide students in a role-playing exercise in which they were invited to act out the sides of the dispute in less oppressive ways. In the process, we began to see potential for the use of theatre to open up space for creating more

nuanced understandings of complex social problems and for imagining more socially responsible approaches for working with them. This case also provides a rich illustration of the continuity between the global and the local, and the challenges even legal immigration presents to racially and culturally homogenous rural communities.

Another promising way to prepare for greater engagement is to guide graduate students toward dissertation projects that address issues of social, political and economic significance to the state. Lynn Harter's dissertation provides one notable and ambitious example (Harter, 2000). Understanding her location in a state whose economy largely depends on agriculture, Lynn decided to study processes of communication and change among the State of Nebraska's Agricultural Cooperative Support Organization. To do so, she received a small grant to travel throughout the state to interview Co-op leaders. Her project provided visibility for organizational communication and useful insights to Co-op leaders as they struggled with adapting to and resisting change.

A fourth project involved my own efforts to better understand a lengthy planned community consensus-building process organized around a dispute between developers and other stakeholder groups regarding the importance and use of a local urban green space. In this case, I found myself navigating the awkward territory between appreciative observer and thoughtful critic of a complex and well-designed public involvement process that produced both inspiring and disappointing outcomes. Unexpectedly, this project indirectly led to the opportunity to assist the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center in their efforts to plan and

implement various public dialogues on issues such as statewide policy concerning the use of electronic medical records and the city of Lincoln's budgeting process. Through both of these projects my self-understanding as "citizen scholar" has grown along with an interest in how various ways of organizing communication contribute to and undermine local democracy.

While the harvest remains uncertain, we will continue to prepare the ground and plant the seeds of engaged organizational communication scholarship in Nebraska. We will do so because it is our responsibility as "citizen scholars" to better understand the politics of place, including the place of organizations and communication in democratic societies (Krone & Harter, 2007). We will do so because we have faith that our scholarship in its various forms will be able to frame and address consequential social problems in ways that produce fresh and potentially transformative understandings of those problems. We will continue to do because we have faith that when the student is finally ready, the teacher appears and that together, we might produce the difference that neither of us could have imagined alone.

References

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