

SPEECH COMMUNICATION: MAINTAINING THE LIBERAL
ARTS TRADITION WHILE MEETING THE DEMANDS OF
THE MARKETPLACE

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Ever the provocateur, Professor Walker would have respondents to his essay defend a position either in favor of a hopelessly other-worldly traditional curriculum centering on the history of rhetorical theory, or in favor of a relatively rootless but popular curriculum devoted to the current pressures of vocationalism in higher education. Of course, I will defend neither position, as incidentally I am sure he would not. But since Walker does raise significant, on-going questions about the discipline of speech communication, I would like to respond.

Allow me to begin with perhaps the greatest understatement possible about the history of education in western civilization: Controversy over the educational purpose in the study of the art of rhetoric is not new. We know the debate at least began with Plato's harsh indictments of the discipline, and we can conclude that it will continue as long as people interact symbolically. If we have any doubts as to whether the debate over the role of communication skills in the educational process is still important today, we need only remember that President Reagan claims in nationally-televised commercials to have saved the Social Security Program, that he uses quotations from Franklin Roosevelt

in his speeches, that he cites the Reader's Digest to support his indictment of the nuclear freeze movement, while all the time being referred to seriously by journalists as "The Great Communicator." Clearly, this is not time to lessen our concern about the role of communication in the education of the American people.

The major point I wish to make in responding to Professor Walker's essay and in stating my opinion about the role of speech communication in the educational process is this: Speech Communication serves two primary purposes in the educational process and must continue to do so; speech communication educators must not allow the discipline to limit itself solely to one of the two purposes.

Speech Communication has two masters. One is the traditional educational imperative of examining the symbolic creations of humankind, traditionally and primarily discourse. As believers in the worth of a liberal arts education, those of us who teach in this discipline hold that a key to understanding our cultures, past and present, is understanding our communication traditions, habits, and patterns. The other master is simply the marketplace where students from our classes must eventually compete for economic survival. As academicians, we naturally are less comfortable with this master. He is something of an alien without our well established concern for tradition, values, and aesthetics. Yet we dare not ignore him. As educators, we must see that our discipline does its part in providing students

with survival skills that will serve them in the competition at the marketplace. Serving both masters is not easy; but it is necessary.

Failing to direct our discipline toward both goals would be very costly. We must guard against fadists among us who would rush us toward the abandonment of our traditional concerns with the role of communication in the forging of our culture and its values and principles. Certainly graduate schools and even parts of the undergraduate curriculum in speech communication owe no apologies for teaching students the rich and important tradition of rhetorical training in the educational process in western civilization. We must continue to provide our students with an understanding of the roots of our discipline and its central commitment to improving the lot of humankind. To do otherwise would be to imply that human symbolic interaction is simply another economic tool for individual exploitation, as opposed to the essence of man's existence to which we have devoted a humanistic discipline committed to the overall improvement of the human condition. We must not turn away from our historic and current interest in the art of rhetoric and all it tells us about ourselves.

But before I seem hopelessly cloistered in the academic towers, let me hasten to do homage to the other master. The pressures today to adapt the entire educational process toward more utilitarian economic skills are real and are important. The current economic downturn has placed

great energy behind these pressures, but this certainly is not something that is new or that has come on us suddenly with the benefits of supply-side economics. These pressures have been present and growing more or less steadily since the end of World War Two with the emergence of an economic middle-class committed to educating their children in a manner that would guarantee their offspring productive career training.

Up until the development of these career-orientation pressures, our curricula were based on the liberal arts tradition formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and on the economic and social realities of those times. Sons of the small number of wealthy members of society attended college, not to secure career training (except in clergy), but to develop an appreciation for literature, history, art, religion, and language. As students have changed so have our concerns for the direction of our disciplines. The liberal arts tradition lingers in the educational establishment and hopefully will remain as the center of educational process. But the growing emphasis in higher education is career training. Students today and the supporters of our educational institutions have every right and justification in expecting the educational process to equip graduates with skills that will make them productive and economically self-sufficient citizens. Our discipline, like other liberal arts disciplines, must contribute in important ways toward those goals. Moreover, speech communication,

unlike many of our sister liberal arts disciplines, has very clearly defined contributions to make. In fact, our colleagues in the private economic sector tell us that we have the most important skills of all to provide to students. A national survey of business leaders recently completed by the economics faculty at Southwest State University in Minnesota indicated that oral communication skills is the number one factor both in obtaining employment and in succeeding on the job. Surely, we do not have to sell out to "rampant vocationalism" to recognize the importance of our providing these skills to our students and making sure that we meet with need in the educational process. Without sacrificing our traditions, we must see that more of our professional energies are spent directing our discipline toward the goal of providing better communication skills for all students in our institutions who must compete in the marketplace for economic self-sufficiency.

We must not let ourselves or others define our academic discipline and its current status in terms of absolute and mutually exclusive alternatives. Speech Communication has two important purposes and functions in the academy -- one to carry on the tradition of the study of humankind's communication efforts, and one to develop among our students the skills to survive in the competition of the market. We must work toward these two goals whether we are teaching majors at the graduate or undergraduate level, or whether we are teaching students who encounter our discipline only through a single basic course.