

Deconstructing Egocentrism through Critical Thinking in the Communication Classroom

Karen Boger

The University of Southern Mississippi

The introductory course for Communication Studies serves an important role in aiding students in their transition towards critical consumption of the knowledge and practices necessary for the development of their major-specific skill sets. However, it remains the responsibility of University Communication Centers, UCC, otherwise known as Speaking Centers, to aid in the competency with which students approach their public speaking assignments and materials. Set apart from other disciplines, Communication Studies requires its students to engage in public speaking performances in which they have a personal stake, a step of self-disclosure that many students approach with apprehension and defensiveness.

Peer and near-peer tutoring, or consulting, services provided through UCCs, serve the essential task of moderating these instinctive self-representation fears through low-stakes conversations regarding how one embodies both themselves and their message content to an audience of diverse lifestyles and experiences. This task requires a depth of self-reflexivity in which many individuals may have never had the opportunity to engage. Thus, it is up to the UCC tutors to encourage students to explore the identities, ideals, and experiences that they may have never before examined under a critical lens. So the question remains, how can consultants best probe the student population we serve to develop critical thinking skills that encourage innovative inspections of long-held individual beliefs and characteristics, effectively allowing students to understand the dissimilarity

between being a critic and being a critical thinker?

According to Paul & Elder (2019), the first step to self-examination is recognizing that through cultural osmosis, both on the national and interpersonal scale, individuals allow themselves to absorb social expectations, prejudices, practices, and traditions. Tracing the origins, implications, and social ties that have influenced the creation of a specific belief set allows students to begin the critical thinking process. Understanding that ideals are not formed in a vacuum, but are in fact heavily influenced by social norms, facilitates the beginning of intersectional awareness. Here, individuals realize that the small actions and messages of various groups with which they interact actually reinforce beliefs to the point of internalization. At the internalization stage, the individual begins self-reinforcing beliefs.

An important distinction that UCC tutors may make is that, while maintenance of familiar or traditional thinking is not inherently wrong, the rejection of transformative information facilitates polarization and may force the audience to also engage in less receptive behaviors during the public speaking presentation. Ceasing self-reflexivity and maintaining an unwillingness to alter belief sets causes loss of the inherent meaning within the ideal itself in favor of self-service. Consistent with assertions from Savitsky, Keysar, Epley, Carter, & Swanson (2011), a lack of self-reflexivity can create further in-group polarization which leads to increased likelihood of only socializing with other

like-minded individuals, which works counter to the development of critical examination. Sedentary, uncritical thought breeds uncritical practices. Thus, when not encouraged to engage with different experiences and perspectives, we gravitate to what is familiar. This complacency of avoiding broadening one's horizons encourages individuals to continue doing what they've always done and thinking in manners in which they've always thought, colloquially regarded as "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" and "choosing the devil you know instead of the devil you don't."

Perspective taking, then, becomes the next strategy for morphing communication students into communication scholars. Because the integration of both social change and individual differences into one's experiences is a catalyst to human adaptation and transformative thought, understanding the motives behind the maintenance of ideals is the first step in developing perspective-taking and creating a more universally developed sense of what is rational and fair, as opposed to what may seem fair to like-minded individuals. Utilizing common motives, described by Atkins-Sayre (2012) as "conversations we value," between oneself and one's audience allows for connections to form between unfamiliar others. The development of compassion amidst differing ideals may very well be catalyzed by advancing the development of critical thinking, where individuals are able to acknowledge a presented idea or information and examine it in ways that include taking perspectives of oneself, associated others, recognized bipartisan groups, and the non-present or non-represented other. The recognition of different perspectives as having inherent value based on the reinforcing experiences of various others allows for thoughtfulness to be extended between unlike others.

Kecskes (2010) also elaborates that the recognition of context-dependent ideals facilitates the recognition of others as possessing different experiences that are as complex and vivid as one's own.

In line with the assertion from Keyser (2007) that speakers often overestimate the salience and the universality of their own experiences, UCCs benefit students by providing lowstakes environments to begin this self-reflexive analysis. Through acknowledging the limitations of our own first-hand experiences and how limited in scope individual points of view are, students can move forward towards experimenting with how they approach the role of being public speakers. For many, the confusion of subjective for objective understandings creates unnecessary tension between the speaker and the audience. Exercises that encourage a more natural exploration of information presentation include regarding critical thinking as a self-directed, self-corrective, and self-disciplined skill which requires mindful dedication. Building from Keysar, Barr, Balin, & Brauner (2000), UCCs allow space for vital steps in the critical thinking process. Namely: examining why one maintains a perspective, investigating the assumptions they hold for other perspectives, and articulating how they approach researching each perspective's reasoning. These activities increase an individual's knowledge of the subject matter, but also knowledge of the human impact of different approaches to said subject matter. For communication tutors, it remains up to each consultation's context as to which of these exercises occur within the confines of the UCC, and which questions the student is responsible for asking themselves regarding how they integrate themselves and their experiences into the content of their public speaking presentations.

References

- Atkins-Sayre, W. (2012). Speaking our minds: Communication centers and critical thinking. In E. L. Yook & W. Atkins-Sayre (Eds.), *Communication centers and oral communication programs in higher education: Advantages, challenges, and new directions* (pp. 13-22). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Kecskes, I. (2010). The paradox of communication: Socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics. *Pragmatics and Society, 1*(1), 50-73.
- Keysar, B. (2007). Communication and miscommunication: The role of egocentric processes. *Intercultural Pragmatics, 4*(1), 71-84.
- Keysar, B., Barr, D. J., Balin, J. A., & Brauner, J. S. (2000). Taking perspective in conversation: The role of mutual knowledge in comprehension. *Psychological Science, 11*(1), 32-38.
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2019). *The miniature guide to critical thinking concepts & tools*. Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.
- Savitsky, K., Keysar, B., Epley, N., Carter, T., & Swanson, A. (2011). The closeness communication bias: Increased egocentrism among friends versus strangers. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 47*(1), 269-273.