How Burke's Terministic Screen Theory can Impact Peer Education Praxis in the Communication Center

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Literary theorist and poet Kenneth Burke defines terministic screens as a rhetorical device that influences how individuals perceive and respond to a situation. In his book *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method,* Burke (1966) provides an analogy about two photographs to explain this device: "They were *different* photographs of the *same* objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters" (p. 45). He goes on to explain that, with the different filters, different aspects of the object, such as texture and form, could be viewed (p. 45). Terministic screens are a lens through which each individual looks at life, and are created through a person's experiences and language acquisition. The language used for one group may not be the same for another. Each word has a symbolic meaning to a person and might mean something different to another person. For example, the medical jargon used by doctors with other doctors is not what should be used when they are conveying information to patients. As a consultant we need to use the language that best conveys our feedback to the speakers.

Terministic screens interact in a Communication Center through the setbacks and benefits of peer education. Students are all influenced by terministic screens, and consultants must implement policies including them to do their job well and keep an open mind. Topping (1996) defines peer education, also referred to as peer tutoring, as "people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching" (p. 322). This is the basis of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's University Speaking Center, for this practice allows for a stronger connection between the consultant and the speaker because both are a part of the same community and have similar experiences. Peer education has become a valuable tool in higher education; understanding how terministic screens operate within this system enables Speaking Centers faculty and consultants to strengthen how consultations are conducted.

Within peer education, peers in the teaching role can be "less intimidating than professors, and students will share concerns with a peer educator more willingly than with a faculty member" (Latino & Unite, 2012, p. 33). Despite this connection occurring between the consultant and the speaker, the consultant needs to be aware of their terministic screens because they create a foundation for bias. Everyone is biased and these biases occur because of a person's experiences and environment. Burke (1966) asserts that "much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (p. 46). Essentially, Burke argues that the language we use

(crafted by our own experiences) shapes how we perceive life and what goes on around us. In consultations, this could cause miscommunication and create a boundary between the consultant and the speaker. The language used by a consultant may not be perceived by the speaker the way that it was intended, and vice versa. Asking for clarification and approaching each consultation with an open mind helps decrease the possibility of establishing a boundary between the consultant and speaker.

For example, to decrease the likelihood of a jargon barrier, consultants should provide the speaker with an explanation of terms that are being used, such as defining an attention getter or verbal fillers. Though the use of jargon cultivated by terministic screens can provide much needed ethos for the consultant, Shook and Keup (2012) state that students need "positive peer influence in academic domains" and that peer educators act as such by welcoming the speaker into the community of the communication center through clear and thorough explanations of technical terminology (p. 8). That is, consultants must create an encouraging environment that fosters learning and growth.

However, biases formed through terministic screens can also be beneficial. They help develop how we view a problem and how we determine a solution. We can also use aspects of our terministic screens to connect with others as we may have interests and experiences in common. Terministic screens have an impact on how we think and interact with others, so we need to be aware of what each situation asks of us and how we respond. For instance, sharing stories with the speaker of when we were in a similar situation can help us find common ground with the speaker and overcome

our differences. Shared or similar experiences promote understanding between individuals and can break down any barrier present in the consultation.

Terministic screens enable individuals to assign meanings to situations which can change depending on who is perceiving the situation. This rhetorical device can both hinder and support the relationship established between Communication Center consultants and speakers. Not being aware of terministic screens can result in miscommunication and sever the connection the peer educator has with their peer. But by being aware, the peer educator can strengthen the bond with their speaker and create a sense of cooperation within the consultation.

Communication centers can teach consultants about terministic screens in many ways. The Speaking Center at UNCG has a short training course every semester that is mandatory for all staff members (in addition to the training class prior to becoming a consultant). At an event like this a quick overview with a powerpoint slide explaining terministic screens would ensure that every consultant learns about terministic screens. Having consultants engage in mock consultations will enable them to implement what they have learned about terministic screens in a controlled setting. Another way to teach consultants (and speakers) about this rhetorical tool is to have a tip sheet that provides the basic information and an example. A combination of these would be most effective because the information is presented both verbally and visually and consultants are able to refer back to tipsheets or powerpoint slides for a refresher.

References

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