

Communication in Service of Positive Relationships:

A Reflection on Values and Approaches

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern States Communication Association, Savannah, GA (April, 2008). Contact: Thomas J Socha, Department of Communication and Theatre Arts, Old Dominion University, Virginia Beach Higher Education Center, 1881 University Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23452, 757-368-4114. tsocha@odu.edu

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Abstract

Drawing on positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), this paper argues for the utility of re-conceptualizing service-learning in communication as a form of positive communication pedagogy, that is, communication instruction focusing on positive communication processes, communication and positive character traits, as well as communication and empowering relationships, groups, organizations, public communication, and media. The utility of thinking about service learning as a kind of positive communication pedagogy is illustrated by describing the foundations of positive communication pedagogy as well as four experiential learning assignments (labeled positive communication experiences) that were part of a new course, *Positive Communication in Human Relating*.

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Service learning in communication is a force for positive change that benefits students (e.g., Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007) and the community (e.g., Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996). The National Communication Association (2008) suggests that communication departments should develop service-learning curricula that include service-learning courses, service-learning internships, and service-learning projects of mutual benefit to students and communities. According to NCA (2008, p. 22), we need to “get the term ‘service-learning’ into mainstream conversation and into standard documents. Much of it involves locating, educating, and gaining the support of opinion leaders.”

Since the 1980’s, service learning has been conceptualized in various ways that include a form of experiential learning, a kind of internship or practicum, and a form of social advocacy (Karlberg, 2007). Karlberg (2007, p. 34) further specified that “service learning is a form of pedagogy that cultivates an orientation towards the welfare of others characterized by a sense of mutual interdependence rather than competitive individualism.”

Given its positive potential, it would seem that service learning would be rather commonplace in communication departments. Yet, this may not be the case. According to Novak, Markey, and Allen (2007), some faculty may be reluctant to embrace service learning for various reasons that include the mistaken belief that service learning is somehow a weaker form of pedagogy. This mistaken belief parallels a similar perceptual problem faced by the relatively new field of positive psychology. The remainder of this paper explores the parallels and illustrates the benefits of recasting service learning as a form of positive communication by

means of describing a preliminary positive communication curriculum as well as a series of experiential learning assignments in a new course on Positive Communication in Human Relating. Before turning attention to positive communication, I provide a brief introduction to positive psychology and its pedagogy.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology widens traditional, business-as-usual psychology's lens beyond mental illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and brings into focus "the scientific study of what goes right in life" (Peterson, 2006, p. 4). "People want more than just to correct their weaknesses. They want lives imbued with meaning The time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called 'the good life'" (Seligman, 2002, p. ix).

Three "pillars of positive psychology" (Seligman, 2002, p. xi) organize the field's research into studies of: (a) positive emotions and positive subjective states (e.g., contentment, happiness, joy, pleasure, positive affect, positive moods, etc.), (b) positive traits and virtues (e.g., see Peterson & Seligman's, 2004, positive character strengths such as: creativity, curiosity, authenticity, bravery, kindness, love, social intelligence, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, hope, humor; as well as positive thinking, etc.), and positive institutions (e.g., strong families, good workplaces, good schools, agencies of wellness promotion, etc.).

To date, hundreds of positive psychology articles and numerous books report research covering such topics as: happiness (Seligman, 2002), flow or optimal experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), positive character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), hope (Snyder, 1994, 2000), optimism (Scheier, & Carver, 1985), and more (e.g., see Seligman,

Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, for an overview of empirical research from 2000 - 2005). There are also positive psychology research meetings such as The European Conference on Positive Psychology (see <http://www.pospsy.ffri.hr/invited.htm>) and National Positive Psychology Summits supported by the Gallop Institute for Global Well Being (Gallop, 2007).

Positive psychology does not seek to replace traditional psychology, but rather to reframe psychological research, pedagogy, and therapy to accept “that goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder, and distress. . . [and to give] as much focus on strengths as on weaknesses, as much interest in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst, and as much attention to fulfilling the lives of healthy people as to healing the wounds of the distressed (Peterson, 2006, p. 5). This reorientation builds in part on humanistic psychology (e.g., Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1951), but also moves beyond it by relying on rigorous social scientific methodology to test its theories.

At the lead of the positive psychology field stands Dr. Martin Seligman, the founding director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center (PPC) (University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center, 2007). Among its many activities, the PPC disseminates information about national and international conferences, offers resources for teachers and researchers (including making available scales and measures of many positive variables); sponsors research projects, and more.

Positive Psychology Pedagogy

The University of Pennsylvania offers the first MA degree in applied positive psychology (University of Pennsylvania College of General Studies, n. d.). And, in the fall of 2007 Claremont Graduate University launched the first PhD program in positive psychology in the U.S. with foci

in positive developmental psychology and positive organizational psychology (see Claremont Graduate University, 2008). The curricula of these programs feature courses in empirical research methods and as well about positive emotions, positive development, wellness, and so on. Undergraduate and graduate courses in positive psychology are also offered at many universities throughout the U.S. (e.g., see University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center, 2007b, for syllabi of positive psychology courses offered at: Cornell, Harvard, Hofstra, Stanford, University of Kentucky, University of Michigan, University of Montana, University of Pennsylvania, and others).

The content of undergraduate and graduate courses in positive psychology include books and collections of articles, but many courses use Peterson's (2006) text, *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. This introductory text provides an overview of positive psychology followed by chapters on: pleasure and positive experience; happiness; positive thinking; character strengths; values; interests, abilities and accomplishments; wellness, positive interpersonal relationships, enabling institutions, and future directions of positive psychology (including work in neurobiology, peace, and more).

Peterson's second chapter—*Learning about Positive Psychology: Not a Spectator Sport*—will resonate with communication educators interested in experiential learning as it describes the experiential groundings of pioneering positive psychology instructors and their courses. Among these accounts, Peterson retells the story of how Professor Martin Seligman began the first positive psychology class with a story about how his daughter Nikki confronted him as he was worked in the yard:

“Daddy I want to talk to you.” Yes, Nikki.” Daddy, do you remember before my fifth

birthday? From when I was three until when I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. On my fifth birthday, I decided I was not going to whine any more. That was the hardest thing I have ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch” (Seligman, 2002, p. 28).

As a parent, Seligman realized that he had been teaching his daughter to correct weaknesses, rather than to identify and nurture strengths. But, at the time, Seligman also realized that his field of psychology had little to say about how to do this. Since then, positive psychology courses have adopted this Seligman-inspired, experiential learning ritual of beginning each course by asking students to share events of their lives that show them at their best as they help students to learn to appreciatively listen. According to Peterson (2006, p. 28), “Positive psychology has become for us a course in rhetoric—not just one of reading and writing, but one in speaking and listening (Seligman, 2004).”

At the foundation of positive psychology pedagogy are experiential learning exercises designed to challenge students and faculty to reorient towards positive aspects of life. Peterson (2006) offers examples of these exercises that include: writing gratitude letters, comparing experiences of personal pleasure to experiences of helping others, recording three good things that happened at the end of each day in a diary and reflecting one them, participating in social and charitable groups and charity work, rehearsing cheerfulness when confronting bureaucracy, giving a friend a good day, and more. At the close of each chapter Peterson’s text includes exercises; citations of thematically related books, journal articles, articles in the popular press, websites, and films that illustrate positive chapter themes; and even titles of thematically related songs.

Towards Positive Communication Pedagogy

The landscape of contemporary communication education is certainly dotted with many examples of what could be labeled positive communication: comforting (e.g., Burleson & Kunkel, 2002), humor and coping (e.g., Alston, 2007), relational listening (e.g., Halone, 2001), prayer as communication (e.g., Baesler, 1999), forgiveness (e.g., Kelley & Waldron, 2006), communication and activism (e.g., Frey & Carragee, 2007), and more. However, this work is scattered so widely throughout communication research literature and communication textbooks that it is relatively unnoticed (it is everywhere and nowhere). What is needed is the conceptual umbrella of positive communication not only to begin to organize this existing work, but also to provide conceptual coherence to positive communication pedagogy that includes articulating its unique assumptions and tenets.

Figure 1 depicts a preliminary organizational scheme of positive communication pedagogy. Using the three pillars of positive psychology as a start, this organization scheme features (a) positive communication processes, (b) positive communication and individual strengths, and (c) positive communication in context (relationships, groups, organizations, and public communication).

Although empirical research awaits, the positive communication processes listed would seem to share a number of qualities: pro-social (versus antisocial), nurturing (versus neglectful), helpful (versus harmful), desirable (versus unwanted), empowering (versus diminishing), and generally, positive (versus negative). These processes have long been a part of communication studies and appear throughout the curriculum, but unlike the dark side of communication, await organization and further thought. Further, it would seem that these kinds of positive

communication processes may already be an implicit part of traditional service learning in communication courses.

Positive communication and individual strengths considers the role of communication and building individual includes the work of Peterson and Seligman (2004) on positive character strengths. This incredible project builds a manual of positive traits that has been described as the anti DSM. The work features many character strengths that await investigation from a communication vantage point (e.g., How is bravery communicated? What kinds of messages facilitate or inhibit bravery?). This section also includes the field's work on communication ethics as well as the field's work on the many positive individual differences that affect and are affected by communication.

Finally, positive communication in context examines relationships, groups, organizations, and the public using a positive lens by considering the role of communication in significant outcomes such as happiness, health, and wellness across contexts. For example, what might a typical group communication class look like when viewed through a positive lens? What topics are central? Are the topics different, treated differently, or both? If a goal is to create a happy group, is the heavy emphasis on decision making processes change? How?

Within a positive communication curriculum, traditional service learning courses readily fit as positive communication in organizations. But this curriculum also opens new vistas that extend the values underlying service learning courses in new directions. One such direction is illustrated below.

Positive Communication Experiences

To commit to a service learning course or a service learning internship is good for students, but not all students will take on this challenge. To increase students' exposure to the values of service learning in communication, a positive communication framework can help. Drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), a model of conversation as experiential learning (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005), and Peterson's (2006) examples of positive psychology exercises, four experiential learning in communication assignments (labeled *Positive Communication Experiences*) were designed for a special topics course, *Positive Communication in Human Relating* (offered at Old Dominion University, Fall 2007). \

Baker, Jensen, and Kolb's (2005) model of conversation as experiential learning features two dialectics: apprehension (concrete experience) – comprehension (abstract conceptualization) and intension (reflective observation) – extension (active experimentation). According to this model, successful experiential learning comes about by attempting to balance these tensions in the dynamic process of conversation. Thus, the general objectives of *PCE's* were to facilitate concrete and abstract learning of positive communication processes, and provide reflective observation and experimentation with positive communication processes (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005). Assessment of *PCE's* employed traditional criteria (i.e., good papers are complete, sufficiently detailed, express ideas clearly, properly cite their sources, are formatted according to requested guidelines, show insight into the topic(s), make wise use of resources, and show efforts of creativity), but each also employed criteria unique to each assignment.

Communicating at my best. This exercise followed the positive psychology tradition of asking students at the start of a course to write about and relay in class a time when they were at their “communication best,” that is, a communication episode where they believed they were displaying what they regard as competent and effective communication skills leading to what they perceived to be positive outcomes. They were asked to structure their responses to include descriptions of: the context, event, participants (relevant details), content of messages, and the perceived effects of these messages (on your partner and self). Also, they were asked to reflect on what kinds of variables or factors in particular might have made the event “positive”?

For this assignment, most of the students chose to report about communication episodes that pertained to conversations at work, more so than conversations with family and friends. These episodes included, for example: successful job interviews, successfully getting back pay from an employer, successfully confronting a manager whose behavior was viewed as unethical, handling difficult restaurant customers as they waited on tables, and managing conflicts with employers. Although the reasons for their choices are not known, it is possible that their choices of communication episodes may be attributed in part to choosing communication episodes where they experienced concrete positive outcomes (e.g., getting the job, getting a good tip, etc.), as opposed to outcomes that are more abstract (e.g., imparting warm feelings, etc.).

A good

communication day. PCE #2 intended to aid students in sharpening and deepening their awareness of positive elements of everyday communication by experiencing a process called savoring (Bryant, 1989): attempts to become conscious of the experience of pleasures. Similar to savoring foods, chocolates, wines, poetry, and so on, students were instructed that:

Savoring communication means immersing self into the details of communication moments (e.g., subtle pitches and tone qualities of voice, qualities of facial cues, subtle body movements, artifacts, scents, fine details of clothing, lighting, temperature, memorable expressions, etc.) and seeking to appreciate their qualities, as if they were a fine wine.

Further, according to Seligman (2002, p. 108), there are at least “four kinds of savoring: *basking* (receiving praise and congratulations), *thanksgiving* (expressing gratitude for blessings), *marveling* (losing self in the wonder of the moment) and *luxuriating* (indulging the senses).”

Seligman also offers various techniques intended to promote savoring such as: sharing with others (recruiting another to share an experience, telling how much you value the moment); memory-building (taking mental photos, mementos for future reminiscing); self-congratulation (telling yourself about how impressed others are), sharpening perceptions (focusing on details of phenomena, as tasting wine, viewing a painting, listening to music, etc.); absorption (get totally immersed and try to sense the process—avoid being reminded of other things, planning for a next move, etc.).

The general thrust is that savoring communication episodes slows down experiencing everyday life to allow for its close examination, suspends focusing on the future or dwelling on the past, increases attention to fine details, and increases abilities to be fully present in the moment, all of which helps promote a greater appreciation of communication in everyday life.

Students were asked to savor an episode of live communication with another individual(s) and then to describe the experience (2-3 typed pages). Evaluation criteria beyond tradition criteria included: an effective description of a savored communication episode should

help the reader to also savor the experience (something to keep mind while savoring and developing a description of the episode.).

In contrast to PCE #1, most all students chose to savor and report on conversations in personal relationships with romantic others, spouses, a parent, and in the case of two parents in the class, a child. As students read aloud their descriptions I recall very warm and genuine feelings among the students as they listened to students attempt what use often approached poetic language. In written feedback at the course's conclusion, this assignment was among those most often mentioned as being memorable and something that they would attempt to continue to enjoy in their interactions.

Communication and values. Peterson (2006, chap 7) discussed ten values that appear to be shared throughout the world: achievement (e.g., personal success), benevolence, conformity (e.g., politeness), hedonism (e.g., personal pleasure), power (e.g., social status), security, self-direction, stimulation (e.g., excitement, novelty), tradition, and universalism (e.g., appreciating and understanding all people). PCE #3 asked students to reflect on this reading in light of communication and relationships. In particular, the assignment asked students to choose one value from the list and to think about the kinds of communication practices they would perform that (a) might facilitate and cultivate the value, and (b) those that might inhibit or not support the value. Students were asked to construct a table where they recorded the communication practices that facilitated or inhibited values as well as reasons why they believed their behavior would be facilitative or inhibitive at cultivating the value. For example, communication practices such as giving commands, bragging, and wearing status symbols (e.g., designer clothes) would seem consistent with seeking power, whereas acknowledging the work of

others, sharing the limelight, and wearing plain clothing would not. Students were asked to reflect on the positive/negative nature of these values (they are not necessarily positive) as well as communication's role.

Students' choices of values were varied, but they tended towards values such as benevolence (listing behaviors such as saying thank you, giving compliments, and communicating forgiveness) and tradition (listing behaviors such as communicating respect for religious customs, participating in rituals, etc.). As a part of the class discussion of this exercise, the class also generated a list of communication values, that is, items they valued about communication itself. The list included valuing communication that is: accurate, appropriate, artful, clear, creative, engaging, expedient, free, honest, mutual, organized, polite, positive, and so on. The concept of a "communication value" may have yet to be considered by communication scholars and may open a door to a new area of inquiry and raise questions such as: What are communication values? What is communication like when particular values such as expediency are dominant? How do communicators manage clashes of communication values (e.g., expediency versus artfulness)?

Positive communication leisure. The final experiential learning assignment asked students to use what they learned in positive communication class and to focus on the role of positive communication in their free, unoccupied time. Specifically they were asked to write an essay where they planned: "A perfect positive communication leisure day" and supported their choices using course readings. They were given 24 hours and asked to write an essay where they chose activities that optimized their communication leisure. Part of the rationale for this assignment was to see what aspects of the course they included, and to see if they were

integrating course readings into their thinking in hopes that this kind of conscious planning might translate into improving the overall quality of their everyday lives (at least as far as messages were concerned).

Student's verbal feedback about this assignment was incredibly positive, but also they found it incredibly frustrating, as many did not have the luxury of a 24 leisure day, nor did they foresee a day like this on the horizon. Students' days featured: savored conversations with loved ones, lots of communication play (e.g., humor, laughter), dinner conversations, participating in charity groups, exercising with friends (wellness promotion), and more. Their communication leisure days did include some media (less so than interacting live with people), but students were careful to choose films from Peterson's lists that sought to promote good feelings, and so on.

Conclusions

Reframing service learning as a form of positive communication can potentially open new vistas for communication education and research. For example, how are students framing service learning internships? Are they framing them as learning about communication's uses in building organizational strengths (strengths approach), or helping to fix problems (deficit approach)? Are they bringing competencies in positive communication processes to the site? Are they thinking about the role of communication in creating positive cognitions and feelings like happiness and hope?

As a pedagogical activity, positive communication experiences can be useful across the field's contexts of communication in relationships, groups, organizations, media, and intercultural/international. For example, in my family communication classes students plan and

execute a positive family communication experience intended to prompt **family joy**. In group communication class, students plan and execute group communication projects such as trying to get faculty and administrators to **smile more**. And even in communication research methods classes, students are urged to pose questions that not only can increase our understanding of circumstances when communication is problematic, but also to consider concepts like optimal communication and its precursors.

At the level of communication curricula, faculty might begin to examine courses in light of positive communication. Are students who complete degrees in communication over-emphasizing the fixing of communication problems? Given that in PCE #1 students emphasized more organizational relationships when thinking about themselves at their communication best, is there a need to be clearer about positive communication outcomes in relationships? In my department we have embarked on developing an MA in communication program with positive development at its center and developing the kinds of courses that facilitate positive communication development across the lifespan.

There is much work to be done on the research and pedagogical fronts of positive communication. For example, systematic assessment of the effectiveness of positive communication experiences on outcomes like communication learning is needed. Do positive communication experiences increase students' motivations to learn about communication? Do students who engage in positive communication experiences in class continue to apply what they have learned after the conclusion of the course? These are among myriad questions on this new horizon for which I am grateful to those in positive psychology for prompting.

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Figure 1

Preliminary Conceptual Model of Positive Communication Pedagogy and Examples

Positive Communication Processes

- a) Comforting communication
- b) Communication activism
- c) Communication and positive cognitions (liking, optimism, etc.)
- d) Communication and positive emotions (happiness, joy, etc.)
- e) Empathic listening
- f) Forgiveness
- g) Humor and Laughter
- h) Negotiation
- i) Love (communication of)
- j) Social support
- k) Spiritual communication

Positive Communication and Individual Strengths

- a) VIA Character strengths (Peterson & Seligman)
- b) Communication ethics
- c) Positive communication traits:
 - Argumentativeness

- Rhetorical sensitivity
- Self monitoring
- Willingness to communicate

Positive Communication in Context

a) Interpersonal Communication

- *Positive communication in human relating* (e.g., ODU's Positive Communication)
- Service learning and interpersonal communication (USM's Course, Conville)

d) Group Communication

- Support groups

e) Organizational Communication

- Internships at community centers
- Internships at not-for-profits
- Peace Corp

f) Public Communication

- Engagement and public speaking (UKY's course, Sellnow)

d) Media

- Family Communication Inc. (Mister Roger's Company)
 - Sesame Workshop
-