Does Communicative Competence Need To Be Re-conceptualized?

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Introduction

I begin this examination of communicative competence with a description of my own context and a short anecdote. My own experience with 21st century communications technology is limited. I do not own a cell phone, do not inhabit chat rooms or blog sites, and use e-mail sparingly for personal correspondence. In short, one might say that I am living somewhat in the past. I also do not have a microwave oven or a dishwasher. None of these omissions are by design so much as the effects of habits that have suited me so far and which to date I have had no compelling reasons to change. My relationship with technology is a variation on Ockham's Razor: why do with multiple gadgets what I can do with one. It is not that I am a technophobe. I use computers daily in my teaching and scholarship and I have a digital camera but my first love is my circa 1960s manual single-lens reflex. I worked successfully for four years at a 'laptop' university, devised many creative computer slide shows and ran on-line discussion groups as part of course requirements. I am, however, not a speedster on the information highway. I prefer the secondary routes with occasions for face-to-face interactions with 'the locals.' I love the smell of libraries and the adventure of wandering bodily through stacks of books. I preface the following anecdote with these remarks to position myself *vis à vis* the subject of communicative competence. Readers with different predilections from mine might wonder why I haven't 'caught on' yet.

In my graduate courses in education I usually require students to write a log or journal of responses to course readings, discussions, and related issues. I find it useful to establish what I call an 'epistolary' relationship with each student; we write back and forth. I use this practice to draw out quiet students, respond to points that do not come up in class, question taken-for-granted assumptions, and try to develop a collegial correspondence with each student. I see this as another channel for initiating them into the communicative practices of scholarship. Being of the opinion that if a person already keeps a journal, log, sketchbook, etc., I need not require another, I do not ask for an entire log or journal to be passed in. I require only excerpts. I believe this allows for the privacy required for free writing to be free. It also means I am not taking away the vehicle that is or might become a medium of a student's reflective practice. My goals and expectations have been influenced by literacy theory and my own school and university teaching practices over the past twenty years.

This year on the third week of my course on research literacies, students passed in journal excerpts as usual. What wasn't usual was the form one student's excerpt took. It was a print-out from his web log. The pages were typical of what one sees on webpages: multiple spaces for multiple purposes including a strip of advertising near the top. As I began making my comments as usual in pencil in the margins, the absurdity of what I was doing dawned on me. "His comments are already out there for the world to read, so why am I scribbling in pencil in the margins of this 'hard copy'?" I went on-line to the blog site to discover that the student's current entries were all responses to my course. They were all available in this public space.

I was unprepared for the public nature of this exchange. My first reaction was to feel 'outed' as a member of a passing generation. Should I enter into this space created by my student and respond on his terms and in his space? I went on-line and did briefly respond with a question using only my first name so as to blend in with other visitors to the site. I felt as though somehow *my* pedagogical space had been up-staged. As I read the student's thoughts on my course and its readings, which he was in effect passing on to countless 'unregistered auditors,' I began to question the literacy practices I take for granted and impose in my classroom. I finished my pencil marginalia on the hard copy and next class handed the sheets back to the student and described how surprising this experience had been for me. My surprise was not because of my unfamiliarity with 'blogging' *per se*; but, to this point I had never stopped to consider its potential implications for my own conceptual framework of communicative competence. How will this anomaly change my expectations? What will I make of it in light of future practice?

The preceding anecdote demonstrates how ways of thinking are affected and effected by communicative practices. After reading my student's blog on my comments and expectations, scenarios played themselves out in my head. I could *require* my blogger to submit a text written to and for me alone. But, what would be the point of imposing my own practice and my assumptions about the need for privacy if the need was mine alone? I could begin to respond to the student in full on his website. But if I were to go on-line with my comments, what's the point of people registering for my course? I might as well be offering a course through distance ed. Whose course is it anyway? Why do I think of it as 'mine'? I select and arrange materials, set up requirements and activities, but the course is non-existent without student participation and response. This I already know and accept, so why the proprietary attitude? Why not design a webpage myself and let the world in on my own reflective process as a teacher the way my student has done? Why not take the on ramp to the information highway? It has its own idiosyncratic locales and learning spaces. Is it time to catch up?

As it turns out I can still justify my handwritten responses, the interventions of my marginalia on students' printed texts. There is a personal quality to it which students tell me they like. Perhaps it is the holding of an actual artifact that we have touched, carried about, and exchanged. This form of response is disappearing and may be a curiosity for many of them. What the blog experience helped me recognise is that, although I have the impression that I am conversing one-on-one with students as I write back to their responses, they might not have that impression at all. Although it might be helping some, there are others who are already very comfortable expressing themselves in a global public space. For them, to even print something off and *hand* it in is increasingly becoming an anomaly in their communicative practices.

As I said from the outset, I am fully aware that this anecdote places me with the dinosaurs; but, according to McLuhan's insight, it is only after changing to a new medium that we see the effects of that which we have left behind (McLuhan, 1964). According to the Ghanian proverb "if you want to know about water, don't ask a fish" (McLuhan, 1969, p. 63). The fact that I am behind the times gives me an effective perspective for comparison. I am part of one of the last generations who are not fully products of digital mass-mediated communications systems.

My opening anecdote raises numerous questions that shape the body of this essay. (1) How do we conceive of communicative competence in curricular contexts? (2) Does this suit our present and future needs? (3) How might we conceive of communicative competence differently? and

(4) How might a re-conceptualised communicative competence inform educational practice?

1. How Do We Conceive of Communicative Competence in Curricular Contexts?

The term 'literacy' [ME f. OF, or f. LL *litteralis* f. L *litera, littera* letter of alphabet, *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*] serves as the convenient place-holder for our various communicative competencies. This is exemplified in the common phrases 'media literacy,' 'computer literacy,' and 'visual literacy,' and in the title of the required graduate course I teach, 'research literacies.' This general sense of literacy as communicative competence has evolved with our progression from the invention and development of written languages through many technological revolutions: the inventions of paper, printing press, steam press, moveable type, and the digital electronic technologies of this era. As Johns argues in *The Nature of the Book*, the identity of print was made.

> [Print] came to be as we now experience it only by virtue of hard work, exercised over generations and across nations. That labor has long been overlooked, and is not now evident. But its very obscurity is revealing. It was dedicated to effacing its own traces, and necessarily so: only if such efforts disappeared could printing gain the air of intrinsic reliability on which its cultural and commercial success could be built. (Johns, 1998, pp. 2-3)

Johns' history of the shaping of print demonstrates how the reliability we take for granted evolved. Today we open a book and have good reason to trust that its contents can be traced to the sources cited. The publisher stands by the reliability of this information. This has not always been the case; it has taken centuries for the evolution of the sophisticated artifact called 'book.' Our conventional notion of print culture, says Johns, obscures the complexity of the issues involved "with all the authority of a categorical definition" (p. 3). Johns documents and explains how we have come to link print and veracity (p. 638). He traces the growth of The Royal Society of London in the seventeenth century where natural philosophers, predecessors of today's scientists, developed print as a fixed and dependable medium for sustaining knowledge claims. The development of modern science cannot be conceived of separately from the The Royal Society's "strenuous efforts to discipline the processes of printing and reading". As Johns says, "[w]hat science *is* has partly been decided by their endurance" (p. 542).

With print and truth so inextricably linked in our minds, it is little wonder that 'literacy' has become the category within which all commu-

nicative competencies are judged. Each competency is conceived of as a modification of competence with the written word and, as Ulmer points out, "school is literacy" (Ulmer, 1998, p. xiii). My view of my student's competence as a diarist was constrained by my ignorance of 'blogging' and by my assumption that one-to-one print correspondence ought to be the standard for our communication. My own assumption makes me wonder how constraining the very concept 'literacy' is to teachers' abilities to account for multiple competencies as we witness the proliferation of new technologies. One might take the view that all this will change as the new generations take over; that there is no point in trying to re-conceptualise things now; that this will happen inevitably as the technophiles take over our classrooms. Far be it from me to dispute the likely inevitability of this change. I do, however, re-emphasize the value of a view from the past offered in the present. As I look in my rearview mirror my peripheral vision is still keeping me on the road ahead and doing so with the knowledge hindsight offers.

2. How Does 'Literacy' as Competence Suit Our Current and Future Needs?

We have seen that 'literacy' is the category we use for communicative competence. 'Category' [f. F Gk *katēgoria* statement (*katēgoros* accuser)] refers to a class or division; and, in philosophy, to one of a possibly exhaustive set of classes among which all things might be distributed (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Whether or not one is a categorical realist, it is through the use of categories that we live our lives.[1] To buy salt I look under 'baking supplies'; for cheese, under 'dairy,' etc. Without a system of categories, I would be overwhelmed by particulars as I am when shopping in countries whose grocery stores are not organized like those I frequent at home. Categories are our conceptual/linguistic tools for managing the daily glut of stimuli presented to the senses. Sorting out what the world presents to the senses requires that we recognize like and unlike things and learn to group them by name and concept. Many special needs involve conditions that do not allow people to group and sort stimuli adequately to cope independently in the world.

Let us now look at what has usually been classified as a sub-category of the English Language Arts curriculum: media literacy. The phrase 'media literacy' demonstrates a type of category mistake. Gilbert Ryle defines 'category mistake' as the allocation of a concept to a logical type to which it does not belong. He uses the example of a visitor to the university who, after being shown colleges, libraries, playing fields, departments, museums and offices asks, 'But where is the University?',

as if, says Ryle, "the University stood for an extra member of the class of which these other units are members" (Ryle, 1980, pp. 18-19). These other units—colleges, libraries, playing fields, etc.—are entailed within the class 'university', just as in following the logical hierarchy of categories, 'university' belongs to the larger class 'educational institutions.'

There is a type of category mistake in the phrase 'media literacy.' The mistake takes the form of a reversal. The root of the term 'literacy' is the Latin *litera* referring to a letter of the alphabet (*OED*). Thus 'literacy' is competence with the written word. The root of 'media' is the Latin *medium* meaning 'middle.' 'Medium' is the middle quality or degree between extremes; the intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to senses; the agency or means by which something is communicated (*OED*). Therefore, the word is a means and 'literacy' or competence with words belongs to the class 'medium,' not *vice versa*. Instead of media being members of the class 'literacy,' competence with the spoken and written word is a member of the class 'competence in a means of expression.' Literacy is a type of communicative competence or competence in the medium of the written word.

In our efforts to incorporate new technologies into traditional, print-based schooling, we have also coined other category reversals in such phrases as 'computer literacy' and 'visual literacy.' Gregory Ulmer suggests that "[t]o speak of computer literacy or media literacy may be an attempt to remain within the apparatus of alphabetic writing that has organised the Western tradition for nearly the past three millennia" (Ulmer, 1998, p. xii). Are my responses to my student's web log evidence that I am part of this attempt? Does our concept need broadening to allow for our relationships in virtual public space?

3. How Might We Conceive of Communicative Competence Differently?

I would like to suggest a new concept, that of 'mediacy,' and I turn first to Derrida's critique of Western philosophy. Derrida coined the term 'logocentrism' to refer to a philosophy of presence which, he claims, dominates the history of Western metaphysics. According to Howells, logocentrism "implies a chain of representations which leads in uninterrupted fashion from experiences and ideas to their expression in speech, and later, perhaps, writing." Derrida claims that the assumptions of logocentrism "enshrine . . . a reassuringly stable and hierarchical view of the world." The belief that meaning is present in signs is a myth (Howells, 1999, pp. 48-49). Derrida uses the term 'trace' to express the absence of full, present meaning (p. 50). As Howells puts it, "[t]he sign

implies that it is a sign of something which precedes it; the trace, on the contrary, in Derrida's account, is not a secondary mark of a prior origin, it means rather that there was no origin before the trace" (p. 51). In Derrida's view the hierarchical system by which thought is prior to speech and speech prior to writing is part of this inherited philosophy of presence. By questioning this system, says Howells, "more is at issue that just the status of Western alphabetic writing; the whole of Western metaphysics . . . is at stake" (p. 48).

Derrida does not claim that there is an escape from this entrenched system; there is no meta-language by which to "get outside our metaphysical heritage." What he offers is an alternative in the form of playing with language, a method that has come to be known as 'deconstruction' and 'decomposition.'² As Howells says, "all deconstruction can do is disrupt the accepted meanings of old words and sometimes coin new ones" (p. 66). Human communication is, in Derrida's words, "the *production* of a system of differences" which "one has to admit, before any dissociation of language and speech, code and message, etc." (Derrida, 1972, 1981, p. 28).

This view that communication is the production of a system of differences interrupts the hierarchical system of logocentrism in which thought is prior to expression; a system on a continuous search for certainty. If communication is the play of difference, then difference is as much at play in a conclusion as it is in its premises. There is always a possible other case to that which is presented. One need only construe premises and/or concepts differently or substitute another method of inquiry. Also at play in any expression are the conventions of the medium or media used. Take narrative as an example. As Usher and Edwards point out, narrative "emphasizes certain and singular meaning and the *reporting* of an already existing ready-made reality" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 150). Regardless of the internal accuracy or truth or authenticity of the substance of the narrative, the form itself is a ready-made reality which "does not draw attention to itself *as a text*" (p. 151). Usher and Edwards refer to this as 'narrative realism' (Ibid.). I take this to imply that any narrative reports on something it assumes to be real; this is a convention of the form. In order to engage with a literary narrative "we *choose* to be deceived" (Coleridge, 1817, in Perkins, 1967, p. 499) knowing that in fiction characters exist in a fictional reality. In the case of a news or research report, we assume that the referred-to reality exists beyond the text.

A vital part of my course on research literacy consists of analysing the conventions of scholarly reporting in order that, as the Zen saying goes, we don't take the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself.

Usher and Edwards use the phrase 'epistemic reflexivity' (p. 149) to describe the kind of awareness necessary to recognise "the workings and effects of power through texts" (p. 151). In stopping to consider the differences between my student's web log and my own expectations and traditional responses to journal writing, I demonstrated epistemic reflexivity. I asked "[w]hat kind of world or 'reality' is being constructed by the questions asked and the methods used?" (p. 148).

In order to encourage epistemic reflexivity in teachers and students I am suggesting we correct the category mistake in our conception of communicative competence so that we focus on the play of differences in any expressive act. Although other concepts are available, it is the term 'mediacy' that, in my opinion, best suits our purposes. Derrida introduced the terms 'gram' and 'différance' as new concepts for writing. He wrote 'writing' with a capital 'w' to distinguish it from writing in the logocentric sense (Derrida, 1972, 1981, p. 26). To engage in his grammatology requires a new way of reading. Ulmer refers to Derrida's style as homonymic; puns are the mainstay of his play of differences (Ulmer, 1985, p. xii). Derrida's Writing alerts us to the assumptions of logocentrism through its intentional ambiguity and, although ambiguity is recognised as a virtue in the arts, such is not the case in the other school subjects. In the forty years since *Of Grammatology* was published, there is little evidence that writing pedagogy in secondary schools has been directly affected by his Writing. The term 'deconstruction' is now in common use but usually only as a synonym for 'analyse' or 'critique.' Are we teaching for epistemic reflexivity? Are teachers and educators asking "What kind of world or 'reality' is being constructed by the questions asked and the methods used?" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 148).

As for adopting Derrida's concept 'différance,' although it aligns communicative competence with the play of differences by pointing to the deferral of meaning in expressive acts, the pun (differ, defer) does not work in English. The English substantive 'difference' has the effect of reifying an expressive event by reducing it to its products. Ulmer has suggested the concept 'videocy' as more representative in this age of the visual image (Ulmer, 1989) and elsewhere he suggests 'electracy' as referring to the very basis upon which mass-mediated messages are possible (Ulmer, 1998, p. xii). I am suggesting 'mediacy' as a concept for communicative competence because, unlike Ulmer's 'videocy' and 'electracy,' it does not stem from the technologies by which communication is possible. These change and the concept of communicative competence needs to be expansive enough to survive new technological revolutions. 'Mediacy' implies agency, exchange, and process.

4. How Might the Concept 'Mediacy' Inform Educational Practice?

Derrida's critique of logocentrism offers us a release from the necessity of 'figuring out' what the speaker or writer *means*, as if *meaning* is something lurking or hovering behind or before or above the expressions one makes. If my sounds, gestures or mark-making do not express what I intended, I am still responsible for their implications; they still say what they say. I can retract them, but I cannot claim they mean something that hovers somewhere. This belief that meaning is a stable entity which can be *reached* or *conveyed* by signs is a closed system and all too often interpretation is viewed as a means of *getting at* an elusive presence. How often have teachers heard the phrase "That's not what I meant"? I refer in particular to instances when the response is delivered in a defensive tone, implying that the intended meaning is the 'correct' one existing somehow in thought but in no way evident in what the student just said. The implication is that the teacher is not supposed to judge the speaker's utterance because the intended meaning *behind it* is what really matters. By recognising that there is no hierarchy of thought over speech or over the other means of expression, a person must take responsibility for his or her expressions. The ubiquitous "That's not what I *meant*" might be replaced by "I see the implications of what I said and don't agree with them." Such a reply would acknowledge a reflective attitude on the part of the speaker to his or her verbal expression. The interaction is not between what was said and what was *meant*; but, between what was said and the many different ways it can be interpreted and elaborated upon. The expressive act is one of mediation. Words are media of communication and to use them effectively is to be an effective mediator.

The 20th century development and proliferation of mass-media—i.e., media with the capacity to communicate a message simultaneously to a mass of people in different locations—affected common usage. The term 'media' now carries the connotation 'mass-media.' To distinguish their media of expression from mass-media, artists refer to them in the plural as 'mediums.' They pluralise the Latin term 'medium' with the English plural marker 's.' Though confusion over Latin plurals in English is common,[3] I believe there is more at stake here than a simple error in usage. Artists are the world's media specialists. Each expresses him or herself in a chosen medium acting with epistemic reflexivity. For curriculum designers to create a sub-category of language arts called 'media literacy' is to fail to recognise the contribution of the arts in mediating human experience. Communicating competently through a countless number

of media is what artists do and have always done. A mass medium such as the computer is merely a new medium of expression which, in the hands of an artist can also be used reflexively; the artist questions his or her medium and methods of its use.

Conclusion

In this article I have touched the surface of how our conceptualisation of curriculum needs to change to allow for changes in our means of expression. In offering new names for communicative competence in a digital age, Ulmer says a new name will help us, "distinguish this epochal possibility that what is at stake is not only different equipment but also different institutional practices and different subject formations from those we now inhabit" (Ulmer, 1998, p. xii). As the new academic term begins I have amended my course outline to include the possibility that my students may prefer to converse globally about our experiences together. Will I venture 'out there' onto a blog site and open my correspondence to anyone surfing by? When the opportunity arises again I expect my curiosity will lead the way.

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Notes

[1] Amie Thomasson (2004) succinctly distinguishes the realist from the sceptical view of categories: "[A] system of categories undertaken in [a] realist spirit would ideally provide an inventory of everything there is, thus answering the most basic of metaphysical questions: 'What is there?' Skepticism about the possibilities for discerning the different categories of 'reality itself' has led others to approach category systems not with the aim of cataloguing the highest kinds in the world itself, but rather with the aim of elucidating the categories of our conceptual system."

[2] Ulmer (1982, p. x) contends that deconstruction is what Derrida did to philosophical texts; whereas, he mimed or decomposed artistic texts.

[3] One hears 'phenomenons' and 'a data.'

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