

## **A Case Study of Outside Events versus the Thriving Speaking Center**

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In April, at the Excellence at the Center Conference, I participated in a national discussion in my role as Managing Editor of *Communication Center Journal* (CCJ). During my contributions to that larger discussion I noted that I believe it is time for writers and future writers of our subset of communication studies to begin to view our work more critically. While I made no mention of it, I was thinking about opportunities to engage from a critical perspective put forth by the publication of a communication center manuscript outside of CCJ in the last year.

As Editor-in Chief of CCJ, Carpenter (2017) provides an outline of the many ways he sees CCJ fitting the growing roles of the communication center community. But first, Carpenter more broadly states that journals “provide a forum for exchanging new ideas and approaches, while also challenging or adding to previous knowledge” (p.1). It is from a place of wanting us to begin to challenge previous knowledge that I encouraged others to do so. I suspect this might be a difficult shift for some and so I have written this case study as a first step. I put myself at the center of this manuscript and offer my own experiences for critical evaluation. As a storyteller, I have used narrative and reflection in the telling of this true story. Some of this particular case was first introduced by one of our students at that same April national conference. The student’s presentation of the situation garnered much follow up discussion then. I believe that alone or coupled with Kramer and Bisel’s 2017 student centered organizational communication textbook, this case study both challenges what we know and adds to communication centers knowledge development.

### **Background**

As I drove to work on the first day that our speaking center would be open for business in 2017, I wondered if I had done enough to help our student employees to succeed. I tried to understand what had allowed this dynamic student-run workplace to thrive for 15 years; I wanted to fully understand the impact that unexpected events happening around the country had on the workplace; and I needed to understand what would still have to be done if the organization was to thrive once again. I have attempted to capture all three in this case

study and invite criticism of the story by way of discussion questions at the end.

I was hired in February of 2003 to direct the university speaking center at a mid-sized public university in the Southeast; the position would start in August. The campus had high ethnic diversity, low male to female diversity, most students were from the same state where the university was located, and the largest age demographic was between 18 and 24 years old. I took on this leadership role in what would be year two of the center’s operation.

The job offer included the opportunity to attend the national speaking

center conference. While I had plenty of communication subject classroom teaching and higher education administrative experience, I had no communication center experience. Taking advantage of opportunities is what I credit for my professional successes. I seized the opportunity to attend Excellence at the Center, the national communication center conference in April.

Connecting with and speaking to many center directors, sitting in on panel discussions, and attending the business meeting at the conference all helped me to begin the process of better understanding the new position. The best advice I got came from the late Paul Sandin who told me to set up a system where the student employees can both succeed and learn from their mistakes and then get out of the way. The conference attendees were overwhelmingly undergraduate students. This meant most of the voices I heard were student presenters. Hearing from student voices tremendously helped me to both frame my priorities and develop both my own narrative and management style around those priorities. The April experience gave me the opportunity to expand my understanding of communication centers in very meaningful ways.

**Priorities.** Higher education communication centers in the United States are generally charged with helping undergraduate students develop their oral communication competencies. Most accomplish this by recruiting, training, employing, and then continuing to professionally develop student educators. At the conference, I heard about the biggest challenges and rewards of educating peers from the student educators themselves. Recognizing that the success of any communication center is carried on the backs of their student educators, my

priorities would be twofold. First, I would support and work with my student staff to develop and maintain the highest-quality peer education center the university would have. Second, I would arrive ready to learn from my student staff taking a *guide from the side* perspective which King (1993) identifies as less directive ways to facilitate learning. I regularly put into practice *guide from the side* during my graduate studies in theatre. My *guide from the side* communication center practices were originally informed by my process drama work which involved youth in long-form improvisation as I coached from the side. I now couple that with Kent's (1994) application of side coaching in social change work. Through my interest in applying side coaching to communication center work, I quickly learned that the MFA I earned years after earning an MA in communication gave me an edge as a faculty-administrator. Improve taught me, as Lindenfeld (2018) points out, the value in deep listening, attention to others, paying attention to the relationship, and humility. This is what I believe most substantially explains why my center leadership differs from that of others. I would approach this new responsibility from an ethic of care and use story as often as I could as a means of teaching.

**Develop and Maintain Highest Quality.** Communication centers, like writing centers, seek to meet student-speakers (hereafter speakers) where they are when they arrive while providing a judgment free place to enter into a dialogue with a student educator about speaking. That certainly means proving a safe space to have conversations about speaking with a trained consultant who values the breadth and depth of conversations that result from mutual respect and interest. It also means meeting a speaker's needs no matter where they are in their speechmaking process. But for me it

also meant meeting speakers where they are as people. That is, addressing the whole person who is the student that entered the center. If they were to provide a high-quality experience, our student educators and student desk managers would need to be skilled in interpersonal communication. The student educators would also need to understand and apply the radical pedagogy that is communication center theory. Connecting with speakers nonverbally and verbally when they entered our main door and then from the start of a session to the end would be held as a value. Student educators and student desk managers would lean forward, smile, take notes, make eye contact, utilize open posture, ask open-ended questions, paraphrase, prioritize “I” language over “you” language, practice empathetic listening, and use each speaker’s first name throughout a session (Cuny, Wilde, & Stevens, 2012). Putting this into practice would mean the student employees would be having very meaningful interactions with speakers. That would on occasion require appropriate referrals as speakers opened-up about how their university or personal life experiences affect them as students. Our student educators would also be trained in making these referrals.

As the student employees developed their own interpersonal communication competencies and capacity to use story to connect, they used these competencies with one another. Also, they employed the competencies one on one when communicating with me. Quickly the practice of meeting people where they are when they arrive influenced the way that I thought about my own student employees as they arrived to work. After all, they were students too and they showed up at the door with their own lives which include positive and negative baggage. This in turn informed my management style as I shifted to the

practice of students first meaning both the students who come to the center for support and the student employees who provide that support. Over time, relationships and people became the values of this communication center. Developing and maintaining the relationships and supporting people as they arrive along with their life experiences, continue to be top priorities as the center begins year 17 under my direction. These values are the reasons that coming to work is a pleasure for all - - on most days. They are also at the root of the center’s positive on-campus and national reputations.

**Guide from the Side.** As previously mentioned, I prioritized a guide on the side management and coaching style. This means that I ask questions and make suggestions instead of telling my students what to do. Doing so meant students would be learning to solve problems from their experiences over simply following direction as they did what they were told. We would operate from a communicative definition of organizations where all that was created and maintained was done so through coordination, self-structuring, negotiation of membership, and maintaining the organization’s image for those who are outsiders (Kramer & Bisel, 2017). When I arrived in 2003 I intended to observe and find ways to support, so I chose to step back and learn about how the work was done without interfering. I was fortunate enough to recruit a graduate student with speaking center experience when I was at the April conference. Together, on Friday afternoons, the graduate student and I would meet for hours going over what we had observed as we sought to find ways to support the student employees going forward. The goal was never to tell the students how to do the work but rather to put into place systems that would allow them to work more efficiently just as Sandin had advised. At

the start of each week, I would meet with my student management team to discuss proposed changes or additions to the system. Only after input and approval from the managing consultants were the changes then introduced. Over time I had developed a strong practice of working shoulder-to-shoulder with my student employees, providing support on the ground - - not from the front office. Asking the students questions as they set out to solve problems with and without me became a hallmark of this staff. The best two questions asked were always, "Why?" and "what problem are we trying to solve?" Once everyone understood the answers to the many ways these questions could be applied, then the hard work of solving problems could be done. This set the stage for how the students would be expected to work with one another.

The fruits of my management and coaching efforts included earned respect for one another, increased capacity to display empathy, self-reliance, increased approachability, group cohesion, and overall likability. It did not take long for the student employees to start signing emails looking for shift coverage with "Speaking Center Love." Student educators after completing the required Speaking Center Theory and Practice course (CST 390) together would speak of that group as their "390 family." Years later Frannie Williams would show up to work with the greeting, "good morning shift family" and a new tradition was formed as students embraced this way to talking about the people they worked with. This speaking center functions along the Theory Z/self-managed/teamwork management style. With a strong culture and set of values shared and consensual decision making in place the task of each shift family remains meeting speakers where they are while supporting the relationships and doing so in the best way they knew how. Overall,

the organization was thriving as my priorities had taken root.

**Unexpected Challenges.** It was impossible to ignore the events happening around the country the first week of July 2016. On Tuesday, shots fired by police killed Alton B. Sterling in Baton Rouge. Cellphone videos capturing the killing went viral. On Wednesday the Face Book Live feed of a girlfriend turned everyday citizens into first hand witnesses to the aftermath of police killing Philando Castile in Minneapolis. In Dallas on Thursday, as citizens peacefully protested the killing of two black men by police, live television coverage featured an ambush that resulted in the shooting deaths of 5 police offers. The sniper, who police killed, reportedly wanted to kill white police officers. On Friday night protesters stood across a major highway in Atlanta, stopping traffic.

The social media that my students were consuming exploded with news, fake news, and opinions related. As students returned to campus in August, they brought with them the fear and anger that these events and social media posting produced. Discussions in the workplace were different now, fueled by a racial divide that was new to the center. This had always been a place where student employees could be their authentic selves and discuss thoughts and ideas, no matter how different. The center, now in year 15, had long established workplace traditions of meeting people where they were. As these traditions were bending, I could see that the events of the summer were negatively changing the tone of our workplace. As an organizational insider, I thought better of attempting to provide a space for the healing and understanding conversations we needed either on my own or with our assistant director.

I looked across campus for help, as I often do. Phone conversations and email exchanges with the directors at the Office of Intercultural Engagement, lead me to ask that they provide a professional to help facilitate the difficult conversations that my student employees needed help with. On September 28, 2016 I completed an online request asking specifically that a discussion, like the one featured in an online article about how Goldman Sachs was having these conversations (Cooper, 2016), be facilitated. I shared the article and asked the facilitators to start with the question, “how do the recent events affecting us as people, in turn, affect our interactions at work?” The next day I learned that a discussion could be scheduled as early as October 19<sup>th</sup>. Unfortunately, my efforts to schedule the discussion when classes did not meet so that more of our student employees could attend meant no one was available to facilitate.

In the end the conversation was scheduled for the first night of the spring semester during a previously arranged required student employee training event. Before then, the rhetoric of the presidential campaign would further divide the student employees and the unexpected results of the election made matters far worse.

Until then, our leadership team would work to emotionally support student employees each day. This meant intentionally checking in with employees at the top of each shift. Doing so lead to ending shifts just a little earlier so that fewer student employees were in the workplace at the start of each shift. Truth is, the physical space at our center was tight both for our efforts and the size of our staff (Cuny, 2018). Getting students to leave helped to reduce the stresses of both space and personal politics. I revived the lost speaking center tradition of hugging by posting to the staff white board, “Need a hug? Get a hug. Got a hug? Give a hug. Not a hugger? Get

out the way!” After, those who needed hugs got them and that was producing good outcomes.

The day after the election I sent an email to the full staff which said, “My heart hurts as I find myself surrounded by the fear you have brought with you to work/the classroom. I have always been passionate about teaching acceptance/tolerance. Today, my soul and shoulders are heavy. I'm supposed to be writing today. On deadline. How could I possibly spend the day writing in the face of your needs? I will turn to the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance web page for guidance. I hope others will do the same - great resource for teaching tolerance. Stop by my office if you need me. We can have tea, or not.” While the work of supporting speakers continued to be strong, post-election conversations in the workplace suffered. Some students stopped talking about issues that divided them, a few stopped talking altogether, others became increasingly frustrated by the silence.

### **A Difficult Conversation**

On the first night of the spring semester the student educators and desk managers joined together for a tradition of training and pizza. The training would take the form of an undergraduate student employee discussion facilitated by a third party from the Office of Intercultural Engagement. The third party facilitator set forth the rules for a safe discussion at the onset. Our leadership team, made up of our graduate assistants and directors, would neither help facilitate nor participate in the discussion. This was intended to be an opportunity to explore how the events happening outside were challenging the student workplace. Although the facilitator was asking the right questions, the students were reluctant to answer. Those who did speak were asking

questions of their own. Some questions asked made other students uncomfortable while some found courage to speak out as a result of those same questions being asked. Student queries that went unanswered included a call for anyone in the room who voted for Donald Trump to be our next president to explain why they voted as they did. As why had always been such an important question to ask in this workplace the query seemed reasonable to some, others found the way in which the query, charged with raw emotion, was stated inappropriate. In the end, no Trump supporters in the room answered the question. Among the student employees that night was one who was new to the organization. This discussion was literally his first speaking center workplace experience. He followed that unanswered query with a hateful value statement against all people who voted for Mr. Trump. As the training ended much work on this front remained. Instead of providing a starting conversation of growth, the workplace was further threatened largely because one new employee unknowingly violated the organization's values of relationships and people.

One week later a second required student employee training event started with my addressing the whole group. Stepping into a brave space that I created for myself, I took the opportunity to revisit the hateful statement made about those who voted for our next president. In acknowledging that tensions were high I spoke to the fact that we have Trump supporters among us and that, "we are, as a group and as a country, going to need to find ways to continue to care for and about one another regardless of who voted for whom." I spoke to the need for more discussion and then specifically called out the hateful statement as not appropriate for this workplace. In the days that followed I heard privately from some Trump supporters who felt recognized and

validated in ways they had not felt on campus since the elections almost two months earlier.

On January 31, 2017 the night before the university's speaking center, writing center, and digital studio were scheduled to open, a joint statement of safe space was posted. It read (Whitaker, Sabatino, & Cuny):

*In these times of uncertainty, the Multiliteracy Centers stand committed to maintaining a safe place where EVERYONE seeking support for their writing, speaking, and digital projects enters into dialogue with a trained consultant who values the breadth and depth of conversations that result from mutual respect and interest.*

*We will continue to foster an inclusive environment respecting all university members, privileging freedom of speech and expression, and we are committed to upholding that value while we are at work. We welcome projects on all topics, spanning all points of view. Our job is to discuss your work with you so that you may communicate more effectively, and writers, speakers, and designers affiliated with the university community are always welcome. The Multiliteracy Centers are YOUR spaces.*

*Furthermore, we ask that everyone upholds this value as well while in the centers and be cognizant and respectful of the fact that the people around them—staff and fellow writers, speakers, and designers alike—may have different perspectives and be undergoing different emotional experiences at this time. Please help us in keeping the Multiliteracy Centers a safe space for all people to work on their written, spoken, and digital compositions.*

When I arrived at campus the next day, we opened the speaking center for

operation. The statement was posted to the front door, sent to all student employees by email, and posted to the web. The process of healing, rebuilding, and moving forward continued.

### **Discussion Questions**

These questions are provided as an invitation to critically evaluate my story. As I stated at the start of this case study, I firmly believe that it is time for the communication center community to openly process what we are doing more critically than we have in the past.

1. Where did the author go wrong in 2016 & 2017? What suggestions do you have for dealing with the issues more efficiently?
2. If you were brought in as the third party to facilitate the discussion, how would you have prepared in advance?
3. As the facilitator, what would your objectives for the facilitation have been? How would you have measured your effectiveness when it was over?
4. Imagine that this student organization is on your campus and that you are one of the student employees. Define this organization legally, communicatively, and socially and provide logical support for your definitions.
5. How might the use of the specific nonverbal behaviors outlined in this case study create opportunities for employees to develop self-reliance, respect for other, and increased capacity to be empathetic?
6. If you were a student employee at this organization, what might some of your internal motivations for being an employee be?
7. How might the self-management of teams be at play in an organization run like this speaking center?
8. Assume that this organization has incorporated the principles of teamwork, create a dialogue for a scenario where two or more student employees demonstrate that they understand the work process, they function autonomously, they can make important decisions themselves through consensus, they manage the resources they need to do their work, and rewards are given to teams not individuals.
9. It is the intention of the author to steer the organization back to a thriving workplace. What advice would you have given to the author as the spring 2017 semester unfolds?
10. Read Arao & Clemens' 2013 article, "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces" and then identify the ground rules that you would have put into place if the difficult conversation in this case study was instead approached as a courageous conversation.

### **Suggested Readings**

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