

## **Analyzing Communication Center Training Through the Lens of Foucault**

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Power is a complicated and uncomfortable topic that affects everyone to varying degrees. A traditional view of power would be a force that someone wields over others. However, Michel Foucault's view of power turns it into a relationship between two or more individuals that becomes quite liberating (1994). Through power-relationships, freedom of choice is created. His view exists beyond mere philosophy and can be applied everywhere in life; the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) Communication Center training course is no different. The UNCG Communication Center training course has the goal of training junior consultants (trainees) into senior consultants and gives them the ability to help other students create and reform presentations, no matter what stage of the speechmaking process they may be on, through the means of feedback. The UNCG Communication Center mirrors Foucault's concepts of power and freedom in training which creates a self-reliance in the trainees that other communication centers should utilize.

Foucault analyzes power through the antagonist's point of view because they are the ones who ultimately need to choose to conform in a power relationship. Power is a mode of operations based on the actions of others with the existence of freedom (Foucault, 1994). Commonly in the workplace, an employer gives an action that an employee must fulfill. Freedom resides within the employee's resistance or at the very least, the opportunity for resistance. If the employee has a full comprehension of the consequences, and if those consequences

do not entail violence, the employee has the full right to resist any force put upon them by their employer. During training at the UNCG Communication Center, each consultant and trainee could resist any form of action put upon them. Of course, there is a chance of getting asked not to return or not being hired to become a full consultant, but these sacrifices are well understood beforehand. The more freedom that is given to the trainee during training, the more satisfaction they will have, and one practicum course professor, Kim Cuny, believes that greater satisfaction in a consultant will lead to greater professional development (2018).

It is commonplace for freedom to exist in the workforce, but the level of freedom given to a trainee at one particular university's communication center is exceptional. The UNCG Communication Center's training course coalesces training for a job and credit for a college course with the aim to teach students about communication skills and theories. This model empowers trainees, allowing for learning and professional development to happen freely.

Trainees have a full semester to learn the processes required to perform their duty. Each training consultant must finish a checklist of goals by the end of the semester. The trainee is given ample time to complete everything on the list and given the freedom to learn at their own pace. Some of the items on the list have a soft time window because they are related to specific consultations that do not normally happen until later in the semester. The power is put exclusively in

the hands of the trainee. Through the time required to finish the checklist and the freedom given, the professional development of the trainee is self-reinforced.

As a 3-credit college course, training employs non-traditional methods based around andragogy to reinforce the professional development of the consultant. Andragogy is the pedagogical process used to teach adults (Knowles, 1984). Everything from the posted schedule to the grading method used, deviates from a traditional format of teaching. There is a posted schedule to complete specific projects, but the dates are tentative. If the trainee can show they are capable of finishing everything on the checklist and performing the duties of being a communication center consultant, they will be given as much time as they need to complete the list. There have been instances where trainees have not finished the class until the start of the next semester or over the summer (Cuny, 2018). Instead of the 10-point scale most college courses use, the grading system is based on a cumulative 500 points by the end of the semester with most of the assignments being low stakes and full credit upon completion. The major assignment such as leading a workshop, the professor will give an assessment of satisfactory or not satisfactory. If satisfactory, the trainee will be able to move on from the assignment. If not satisfactory, the trainee could be given an unlimited amount of opportunities to redo the assignment and receive feedback on the assignment to make it satisfactory. Through the non-traditional manner of assessment, the trainees are given the freedom and power to control their own professional development. Instead of worrying about their grades, the trainee is given the ability to fix any errors and grow in the areas of the assignments that are designed to create growth.

Foucault had an allegory that he believed was the perfect way to explain the best practice in balancing power relationship to create the most amount of liberation between individuals (1995); it was the Panopticon, a theoretical prison developed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. The Panopticon would be a circular structure that held the cells that the prisoners would live in and have a centralized tower that would allow for a guard to be able to see the prisoners, but not allow the prisoners to see the guard (Foucault, 1995). Having the prisoners be unable to know if they are being watched at any given time would produce a more conforming behavior within the inmates and that self-regulating behavior would be more deeply embedded within them (Foucault, 1995). Foucault argues that organizing aspects of society that reflect the Panopticon, such as reforming prisoners, training workers, or teaching students, would create a more lasting change in the individual than traditional forms of learning (1995).

However, instead of having a guard held within the tower, Foucault would allow for the prisoners, or, in this case, the UNCG Communication Center trainees, to have access to the tower (1995). Every communication center training course at UNCG from fall 2014 to spring 2019 has incorporated some form of outside communication for trainees to maintain surveillance on each other through digital applications such as *Group Me*. At any given time, a trainee can relay a message to all the other trainees to inquire about the progress of each trainee in the course. The trainee symbolically steps into the tower and attempts to alter behavior and at any given moment, and the same can be done to that trainee. The power is shared between all the trainees and they all have the freedom to exercise that power.

Foucault's philosophy exists everywhere in consultant training in the UNCG Communication Center, and from this training, the consultants have the skill set to thrive in their environment. Every aspect of consultant training at UNCG revolves around andragogy and embedded in this approach are the power relationships and liberation necessary to breed professional development in the consultants who decide to train to work there. Other communication centers should follow a training model based on Foucault's concepts of power relations and freedom to help their consultants become more effective and self-motivated peer tutors.

## References

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