



Carroll C. Arnold

Distinguished Lecture 2011

Voice Lessons for Social Change

Brenda J. Allen, Ph.D.



The Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture

On October 8, 1994, the Administrative Committee of the National Communication Association established the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture. The Arnold Lecture is given in plenary session each year at the annual convention of the Association and features the most accomplished researchers in the field. The topic of the lecture changes annually so as to capture the wide range of research being conducted in the field and to demonstrate the relevance of that work to society at large.

The purpose of the Arnold Lecture is to inspire not by words but by intellectual deeds. Its goal is to make the members of the Association better informed by having one of its best professionals think aloud in their presence. Over the years, the Arnold Lecture will serve as a scholarly stimulus for new ideas and new ways of approaching those ideas. The inaugural Lecture was given on November 17, 1995.

The Arnold Lecturer is chosen each year by the First Vice President. When choosing the Arnold Lecturer, the First Vice President is charged to select a long-standing member of NCA, a scholar of undisputed merit who has already been recognized as such, a person whose recent research is as vital and suggestive as his or her earlier work, and a researcher whose work meets or exceeds the scholarly standards of the academy generally.

The Lecture has been named for Carroll C. Arnold, Professor Emeritus of Pennsylvania State University. Trained under Professor A. Craig Baird at the University of Iowa, Arnold was the co-author (with John Wilson) of *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, author of *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (among other works), and co-editor of *The Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*. Although primarily trained as a humanist, Arnold was nonetheless one of the most active participants in the New Orleans Conference of 1968 which helped put social scientific research in communication on solid footing. Thereafter, Arnold edited *Communication Monographs* because he was fascinated by empirical questions. As one of the three founders of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Arnold also helped move the field toward increased dialogue with the humanities in general. For these reasons and more, Arnold was dubbed “The Teacher of the Field” when he retired from Penn State in 1977. Dr. Arnold died in January of 1997.

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University of Colorado Denver



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Voice Lessons for Social Change

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Thank you, Rich, for your wonderful introduction, and for inviting me to be this year's Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecturer. I am honored, indeed. This opportunity has opened up a new realm of inquiry for me, and I am grateful. Thanks also to Pearson Higher Education for sponsoring this event, to Chris Ferguson for his research assistance, to members of NCA who sent me information about their research on voice and social change, and to Brenda Lewis Holmes, Theodis Hall, and especially Karen Lee Ashcraft for their constructive feedback as I prepared this talk. Finally, thanks to those who developed this event in the memory of Carroll C. Arnold. I never met him, but I have heard nothing but stellar accounts of him as a fine human being.

When I was in the 7th grade, the music teacher at my school, Mr. Hatch, asked me to sing a solo for our Easter program. The song: "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord." When we met to rehearse, he played the song in the soprano line. I sang it, but it didn't feel right. However, I didn't tell him. We rehearsed several times, and he finally recorded me singing the song *a cappella*. The Friday before Easter, the song was played during homeroom period over the school's loudspeakers. As I listened, I felt detached from the voice. The principal didn't announce that I was the singer, and I didn't tell anyone, not even my mother. When I asked her about it recently, she wondered why I was silent about the performance, and I still couldn't explain it. While singing the song, I just didn't feel "like myself." And, the song didn't seem like my natural voice. Although most of us feel weird when hear a recording of our voice, this time felt especially strange.



Brenda J. Allen delivering the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture at the NCA Annual Convention in New Orleans.

Here I am almost 50 years later, an organizational communication scholar interested in power dynamics related to how we use communication to construct social identities. Because of my education in these and related topics, I can readily analyze my experience with Mr. Hatch to discern implications for my talk this evening: “Voice Lessons for Social Change.”

To understand organizational communication processes, I often rely on social constructionism, a school of thought which contends that humans interact within social systems to create reality based on knowledge derived from dominant discourses.¹ Social constructionism encourages us to question taken-for-granted knowledge about the world, and therefore about ourselves. Social constructionism also directs us to discern relationships between contexts and constructions, because knowledge and meaning vary across social-historical contexts. Therefore, I should describe the context in which the soprano scenario occurred. The year was 1963, the middle of the civil rights movement, and my first year being the only colored² girl in most of my classes because students were tracked according to scores on standardized tests, and mine were high. There also was one colored boy in those classes. I’ve since wondered if that was a coincidence, or if school administrators had a limit of one colored girl and one colored boy for those advanced classes. I had come from an elementary school -- where most of the students were colored, and almost all of the teachers were white -- that was across the street from the low-income public housing neighborhood where I lived. My elementary school teachers had singled me out as an exceptional student. I was eager, bright, and compliant. My family had taught me that the teacher was the authority whom I should always obey. I was, in mundane and Foucauldian terms, well disciplined.³

My junior high school was a couple of miles away from my home, in an upper middle class neighborhood. The student population was about 50% white and 50% colored, with a few Puerto Rican students. Almost all of the teachers there were white, too. In junior high and high school, I performed quite well (I was always on the honor roll).

Within this context, why do you think Mr. Hatch chose me to perform the solo, out of all of my peers? Social constructionism directs me to consider an additional aspect of the context: the social identities of the key players. According to social constructionism, we use communication to construct social identities:

We learn from a variety of sources about who we are and who we might become, mainly through interacting with others. . . We communicate with other people based on how we have been socialized about ourselves and about them. As we interact, we are subject to biases and expectations about social identities that can affect what, how, when, why, and whether or not we communicate. And, most interactions occur within established normative contexts where members of groups tend to be more or less privileged than others.⁴

In this case, Mr. Hatch was a white, middle-aged, presumably middle class male teacher. I was a colored female, working class, teenaged student socialized to see myself as exceptional among other colored students, and equal in terms of intelligence to my

white classmates. My identity profile may have prompted Mr. Hatch to choose me to perform the solo. Because I was colored, he may have seen me as a logical choice for a song identified with Negro slaves. That also may have been why he didn't choose a white student, especially since many of the white students in my school were Jewish. (Note that this was a public school, which makes it intriguing that we even *had* an Easter celebration.) He also may have assumed because I was colored that I was a Christian who would willingly sing the spiritual. Actually, I wasn't affiliated with any religion. Also, because I was "the" smart colored girl, he may have figured that I would perform well. Of course, he also may have chosen me simply because I had the best voice in the school! Regardless of why he selected me, because of how I had been socialized, I didn't even think about either refusing to sing, or telling him that I didn't like singing soprano.

This story helps to establish the primary premise of my talk: Communication scholarship about voice offers exciting ideas for how we, as members of the communication discipline, can effect social change. To discern voice lessons for social change, I read research reports that many of you shared, and I reviewed related literature. Based on those sources and by perusing the convention program, I have been heartened to learn of many exciting endeavors dedicated to transforming local, national, and international organizations, groups, and communities. These make me proud to be a member of our discipline. However, rather than focusing on external settings for social change, I will concentrate on the context of higher education. I believe that communication scholarship about voice offers exciting ideas for how we, as members of the discipline of communication, can effect social change *within higher education*. I define social change simply as "efforts that aim to transform society to think and act on behalf of solving social problems."⁵ The types of social problems that I am focusing on relate to persistent discrimination and inequities that members of non-dominant groups experience in U.S. society. As I discuss later, higher education is a prime site for delving into those issues and for striving to effect change.

More specifically, I believe that we can accomplish social change through examining power dynamics related to how we use communication to construct social identities in our academic workplaces. By social identity, I mean a person's sense of self based on membership in any group.⁶ I am most interested in social identity categories in the United States that have a history of discrimination and activism. These include gender, race, age, sexuality, ability, class, nationality, religion, and their intersections. Among these categories, each person identifies with and/or is ascribed to either a traditionally dominant or non-dominant category, with potential consequences of enjoying privileges as a member of the former, or experiencing discrimination as a member of the latter.⁷ However, social constructionism refutes essentialist claims that identity is natural, inevitable, and universal, thereby allowing us to consider ways to resist dominant notions of identities and to construct more equitable ones.

Regarding voice, power dynamics, and the social construction of social identities, my story raises numerous questions relevant for us as members of academia and communication studies: When do we feel as if we sound like ourselves or not? What contextual variables seem to affect how we feel? How does our sense of voice connect to our various social identities? Is there such a thing as a "natural" voice? What roles do

we enact similar to mine as a student, or to Mr. Hatch's as a teacher? As students, what "songs" are we asked/expected to sing, for what purpose, in what key and register, using what media? When, if ever, do we choose or create own songs? Or refuse to sing a song? Or ask to offer our rendition of an existing song? Or invite or demand to collaborate to choose or create a song? What about when we're in teacher roles, like Mr. Hatch? What voice lessons were we taught, and how do they affect what we teach? Whom do we choose as soloists, and on what do we base our choices? Whom do, or might, those soloists represent? Whom are we overlooking when we make such choices? On what resources do we rely to select songs? How much agency, if any, do we share as we enact our roles? What unexamined assumptions do we make related to all of these choices and others? How can/do we dis/empower ourselves and others regarding their voice?

To explore the proposition that our discipline has powerful potential to effect social change in higher education, I'll explain why we should focus on higher education, after which I will offer an overview of communication scholarship related to voice and identity. I will conclude with lessons learned and how we might apply them.

Why Focus on Higher Education?

Higher education is a crucial context where we tend to (re)produce dominant ideologies such as white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and ableism, which help to foster discrimination and perpetuate inequities. Similar to other organizations, higher education institutions are significant sites of identity construction where "social actors construct their identities. . . through discursive practices, specifically, through the rules, behaviors, and meaning systems that become everyday occurrences."⁸ Formal and informal policies within higher education usually dictate that members enact dominant norms, linguistic codes, and communication styles during everyday interactions, which can lead to overt and covert discrimination and conflict. These conditions can help to reinforce dominant stereotypes and expectations regarding members of various social identity groups. They also can disparage and deter members of non-dominant groups from participating fully and successfully as students, faculty, and staff. Moreover, structures of educational systems, and interactions within them, tend to reinforce hierarchies of the larger society. These structures often exclude and/or inadequately represent certain groups. Consequently, higher education has a history of exclusion and prejudice related to traditionally marginalized groups such as women and people of color.

Fortunately, higher education also is site for resisting dominant ideologies, for being more inclusive, and for fostering social change. In the years since I was in the seventh grade, fundamental changes have occurred. For instance, in the late 1960s, students of color and white allies forged a movement to demand curricular reform, better access to higher education, and more professors of color.⁹ Their efforts marked the beginning of multicultural reform in higher education which includes areas of scholarship dedicated to traditionally marginalized groups (e.g., women's studies, ethnic studies, disability studies, etc.); policies and programs dedicated to being more inclusive; and mandatory cultural diversity courses. Although these and related endeavors range greatly in terms of their success and sustainability, they show that higher education has been responsive.

Although we've made progress, we have much more work to do, as evidenced, for example, by persistent race and gender disparities in college enrollment and college achievement among students, as well as low percentages of non-dominant groups in higher level administrative and faculty positions. Despite some positive change, disparities also persist in hiring, tenure, and compensation practices. Examples of these and related issues abound in publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education*.

Higher education also is a crucial context for social change due to demographic factors. I'm sure you've heard population statistics and projections that will affect society in general and higher education specifically. These indicate that the United States is and will become more diverse than ever in terms of racial and ethnic groups that previously comprised a minority percentage of the population. For example, by 2025, the National Science Foundation projects that minorities will constitute 38 percent of the college-aged population.¹⁰ Also, racial-ethnic minorities are predicted to surpass Caucasians in the U.S. population soon after 2050.¹¹ Projections also indicate an increase in students with disabilities, first generation students, international students, and adults returning to college.¹² Educational leaders often cite these and other demographics as rationale for increasing efforts to tolerate, manage, affirm, or value diversity in higher education in order to be more competitive in the global marketplace. The refrain seems to be: "get ready, more of them are coming."

I wholeheartedly agree that we should be prepared. However, I question assumptions that seem to undergird this approach. For instance, if "they" weren't coming, should we plan to do business as usual, which tends to privilege dominant belief systems and related ways of knowing and being? Rather than strive to effect change based mainly on a demographic rationale, I encourage us to seek change because of the moral-ethical imperative that **regardless of our students' social identities**, we should be preparing them to interact humanely and inclusively while they are in college, and after they leave. This means that not only should we develop and implement inclusive curricula, but we also should create and maintain inclusive climates and model inclusive interactions among ourselves as well as with all students. This point is especially important as we also consider implications of demographics for the future of higher education. We should be cultivating climates where all students are encouraged, empowered, and enthused about becoming members of the professoriate. However, we are not doing as well as we might. During a [conference] session this morning, a graduate student who self-identified as a biracial lesbian stated that she does not feel welcome within her department, and she is reconsidering whether or not to become a professor. And, I've often heard firsthand and from numerous colleagues that many other prospective scholars from non-dominant groups have either opted not to pursue graduate studies, or they have left their programs. Moreover, many of them who remain often report similar challenges that seem above and beyond those that most graduate students tend to experience.

A final, obvious reason to focus on higher education is that we are usually much more in control of these settings than in external ones. Although some policies and expectations constrain us, we have ample room within our own domains to effect change. Basically, as

communication scholars Katherine Hendrix, Ronald L. Jackson, II and Jennifer Warren assert, “What we know about the changing demographic landscape of this country and effective, confirming communication should be reflected in our classroom teaching, interactions with students and colleagues, and our research programs.”¹³ As I discuss next, our discipline provides exciting guidance for how to effect such change in our hallowed halls.

Voice in Communication Studies

Scholars in varying areas across the discipline have written extensively about voice, and they have addressed diverse topics.¹⁴ To further contextualize the potential of communication to effect social change, I will focus on scholarship from organizational communication because it is my primary area of study and I am most familiar with our contributions. Equally as important, organizational communication is a logical focus because we study processes that people use to make meaning within goal-oriented social collectivities (organizations) such as institutions of higher education.

Organizational Communication Scholarship about Voice

Most scholars who study voice and organizational communication are critical theorists, who study how people enact power relations in organizations, which we view as sites of domination and exploitation, and as sites of resistance and transformation. We analyze micropractices, or everyday discourse and interactions, within macro-systems of organizations and society. Through our efforts, we strive to illuminate power discrepancies and to help people realize how power operates. We seek to liberate and emancipate members of non-dominant groups by exploring how and why people comply with dominant belief systems, and how they and their allies resist those systems. As Stanley Deetz explains, the goal of critical organizational communication studies is “to create a society and workplaces that are free from domination and where all members can contribute equally to produce systems and meet human needs and lead to the progressive development of all.”¹⁶ The following overview of scholarship about voice in organizational communication is not exhaustive; rather, it offers a reasonable representation of related perspectives to identify foundations and frameworks for how we might effect social change.

In 1991, Marlene Fine presented a framework for a model of multicultural communication in organizations in an essay entitled “New Voices in the Workplace.”¹⁷ Based on population projections that more women and people of color would be entering the workforce,¹⁸ she asked scholars to consider cultural differences in values, assumptions, and communication styles, and to strive for equitable workplaces where members of all groups have access to organizational resources and opportunities to express authentic voices. She advocated multicultural discourse, where “all voices retain their individual integrity yet combine to form a whole discourse that is orderly and congruous, in much the same way that musicians create harmony through the combination of simultaneous notes to form chords.”¹⁹ I believe that discord and cacophony also can be productive. Fine encouraged organizational communication researchers to identify and understand experiences of multicultural groups within organizations.

In 1992, Dennis Mumby and Linda Putnam²⁰ developed a seminal concept known as *bounded emotionality*, in contrast to *bounded rationality*, a dominant perspective on decision making in organizations. Based on the premise that bounded rationality and related processes help to reinforce patriarchal modes of organizing, they offered a feminist poststructuralist reading of bounded rationality which endorses analyzing [how power manifests through everyday discursive practices that become normalized in organizations](#). To briefly explain the two concepts, bounded rationality challenges the classical idea that individuals use logic and reason to make optimal decisions. It asserts, rather, that because we are constrained (bounded) by insufficient resources, time and ability, we tend to rely on rules of thumb, and we “satisfice,” (i.e, meet adequate selection criteria). Bounded rationality glorifies cognitive processes and devalues feelings and emotions. In contrast, bounded emotionality refers to “an alternative mode of organizing in which nurturance, caring, community, supportiveness, and interrelatedness are fused with individual responsibility to shape organizational experiences.”²¹ Within this concept, *bounded* refers to “an individual being able to recognize another person’s subjectivity, a state that is necessary for producing understanding or interrelatedness.”²² Thus, bounded emotionality permits us to recognize and express feelings in service of creating and maintaining inclusive organizational climates.

Mumby and Putnam contrasted “voices” of bounded rationality and bounded emotionality to “challenge dichotomous, oppositional thinking,” and to generate a third or middle voice based on the interplay of both. Mumby and Putnam also questioned norms of bounded rationality that disparage or trivialize emotions and discipline us against expressing feelings in the workplace. They promoted the positive potential of emotions and emotional reactions to shape the design and nature of organizational change, concluding that “consciousness of other people’s feelings is a key to perceptual awareness and developing an understanding of diversity in the workplace.”²³

In 1994, in an article entitled “Gaining a Voice,” Patrice Buzzanell also critiqued traditional concepts in organizational communication studies.²⁴ She explored the potential of feminist voices to portray power dynamics in how we socially construct and enact gender during everyday interactions. She advocated applying feminist perspectives about three dominant themes that guide theorizing about organizational communication: competitive individualism; cause-effect/linear thinking; and separation/autonomy. She explained that these valorized ways of interacting in organizations reinforce masculine ways of knowing and “exclude women’s experiences, values, and forms.”²⁵ Thus, she paired and contrasted them with three alternative themes from feminist paradigms: community (and individualism), integrative thinking (and linear thinking), and connectedness (and autonomy). She recommended that we foreground feminine/feminist values in theory and practice as we analyze everyday interactions.

In 1995, I echoed the potential of feminist approaches for investigating and changing power dynamics in organizational settings. However, I stressed a need to incorporate race and ethnicity into critical organizational communication studies, due to a dearth of research on this socially significant issue.²⁶ I advocated frameworks that give voice

to participants rather than privilege researchers' voices. For instance, I recommended feminist standpoint epistemology, which invites members of disenfranchised groups to express their everyday experiences and concerns. These can reveal otherwise unexposed aspects of the social order.

In 1996, Dennis Mumby and Cynthia Stohl cited voice as one of four central problematics that implicitly frame an identity and research agenda for organizational communication studies (the other three problematics are: rationality, organization, and organization-society relationship).²⁷ They contended that "the issue of voice is integrally bound up with the relationship between communication, ethics and democracy."²⁸ Regarding voice, they asked:

How can we as organizational communication scholars provide insight into the practices of traditionally marginalized groups or forms of organizing? How can we show from a communication perspective that what appears natural and normal about organizational practices is actually socially constructed and obscures other organizational possibilities?²⁹

They urged scholars to be mindful of these problematics as they develop and conduct research.

During the mid-1990s, Robin Clair began to caution us regarding how we employ voice as a metaphor. Although she acknowledged the powerful political potential of the metaphor for communication studies, she observed that "voice does not always win out; it is sometimes exercised in futility and sometimes at the expense of human life."³⁰ She urged us to consider the metaphor of silence through a concept called "organizing silence" to represent "complex, dialectical, and sometimes paradoxical aspects of silence and voice."³¹ For instance, she explained that "sometimes, voice can silence, and other times, silence can speak" and that "within each practice of oppressive of silence is a possibility of voice."³² She explored organizing silence to understand "how the interests, issues, and identities of marginalized people are silenced, and how those silenced voices can be organized in ways to be heard."³³ She also asked us to be responsible when we represent voices.

Also during the 1990s, Stanley Deetz referred to voice as a political act that "opens both the corporation and individuals to learning through reclaiming differences and conflicts overlooked or suppressed by dominant conceptions or arrangements."³⁴ Although he concentrated on corporate settings, his ideas also apply to institutions of higher education. He asserted a moral and practical rationale for representing more diverse members of society and their values.³⁵ He further observed that when dissenting members openly articulate their concerns, their oppositional discourse can provide alternative ways of making sense of the organization. Deetz encouraged managers who wish to reform corporations to recover silenced and marginalized voices and involve them in dialogic processes to codetermine more democratic workplaces.³⁶

These and related conceptualizations and perspectives related to voice provide useful frameworks and foundations for research, teaching, and practice in critical

organizational communication studies, and they have led to significant progress, especially regarding women's issues and feminist theorizing. However, some scholars have expressed needs to deepen and expand our efforts.

For example, in 2003, Karen Ashcraft and I called for systematic attention to racial dynamics of organizational communication studies by analyzing widely used, highly regarded introductory textbooks in our field.³⁷ Because textbooks serve as the voice of a canon, they reflect and reproduce what a discipline values. They also play powerful, pivotal roles in educating and socializing students as well as current and prospective faculty members. We identified and critically analyzed subtle representations embedded in the textbooks to reveal ways that our scholarship helps to craft the dominance and invisibility of Whiteness through "intellectual hegemony."³⁸ We maintained that those texts narrate race through the voice of whiteness, thereby preserving the normative power of organized Whiteness. We concluded with specific suggestions for revising the racial subtext of our scholarship. Essentially, we decried silence about race in general as well as the rhetorical silence of whiteness.³⁹

In 2007, Kirsten Broadfoot and Debasish Munshi also critiqued disciplinary practices and their consequences.⁴⁰ Identifying themselves as outsider refugees, they articulated a need to recover "alternative rationalities, worldviews, and voices on the processes of organizing in diverse contexts."⁴¹ They maintained that the field tends to inculcate Euro-American intellectual traditions and related voices, while remaining impervious to postcolonial studies and native/indigenous voices. They claimed further that we often ignore inequality and exploitation in our own scholarly community. They elaborated: "Diverse voices, if present at all, are still channeled through dominant Western loudspeakers, and Western notions of rationality silence any discussion of emotionality or subjectivity, both of which are crucial elements of diverse organizing practices."⁴² To re-envision the problematics of voice, rationality, organization, and the relationship between organization and society that Mumby and Stohl outlined, they urged us to engage in postcolonial reflexivity, which asks us consider the following question:

To what extent do our scholarly practices - whether they be the kind of issues we explore in our research, the themes around which we organize our teaching syllabi, or the way that we structure our conferences and decide who speaks (and does not speak), about what, in the name of intellectual practices - legitimize the hegemony of Western power structures?⁴³

They invited dialogue to "reimagine the scholarly community of organizational communication as a transdisciplinary and transgeographical entity capable of disrupting contemporary hierarchies of knowledge and making sense of our flattening world."⁴⁴

Mumby and Stohl wrote a thoughtful response to Broadfoot and Munshi's essay that concedes some points and contests others.⁴⁵ To explore possibilities of a dialogue between organizational communication studies and postcolonialism, they posed several questions, including: "How might postcolonial scholarship enhance our understandings of the ways that the multiple discourses of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and language

intersect in both organizational scholarship and in the process of organizing?"⁴⁶ They also wondered if and how Ashcraft and Allen's deconstruction of organizational communication textbooks as "raced" might look different if placed in dialogue with a postcolonial perspective. They concluded that engaging such questions will require "a new form of reflexivity and global consciousness that transcends our prior disciplinary analysis."⁴⁷

In conclusion, critical organizational communication studies provide several approaches for understanding, challenging, and changing voice dynamics within organizations. Scholars have made notable progress applying those approaches to study gender and to incorporate feminist perspectives. Moreover, we have slowly begun to expand and deepen research about other aspects of identity. However, most of this work is either theoretical, and/or it concentrates on organizations external to the one we all have in common: the academy. It seems, as organizational communication scholar Anne Nicotera observed, that the experience of academic identity as a source of rich data about the human experience has been taboo.⁴⁸ She asserted that we should study our scholarly enterprise as a social phenomenon. She claimed further that we can uncover latent ideologies by examining our own life experiences within academia. I concur. Therefore, I turn next to scholarship by, about, and for members of traditionally marginalized groups within higher education. This body of work offers a rich resource for addressing many of the issues related to voice, identity, and ideology that critical organizational communication scholars seek to understand.

Reflexive Scholarship about Voice in/and the Academy

To delve into those issues, I conducted a critical exploratory study of how scholars of color and their allies in the discipline of communication describe their experiences in or related to academia. I focused on scholars of color and their allies based on my research program and experiences with race in higher education, and to respond to recurring calls for research about race and organizational communication. I analyzed 33 publications in which authors wrote reflexively⁴⁹ about their personal and professional experiences in higher education.⁵⁰ From this sample, themes emerged from which we can discern voice lessons for effecting social change.

Before I share those themes and examples, I must note that a divide tends to exist between theoretical and reflexive writing based on the dominant conception of theory as abstract, objective, rational, universal, and intellectual, as contrasted with views of reflexive writing as atheoretical, confessional, emotional, local, and provided mainly to position and legitimize non-dominant scholars' work. Some critics dismiss or devalue such writing, sometimes by characterizing it as self-indulgent, poignant, or narcissistic and vain⁵¹. However, this reaction replays power dynamics related to voice and organizational communication that scholars have critiqued, such as valuing rationality over emotionality, or linear thinking over integrative thinking, and neglecting to consider diverse standpoints. It also helps to maintain dominant approaches to academic writing. I turn now to voices from the margins *not* to reproduce that perspective and its

underlying assumptions based on dominant ideologies about which ways of knowing are more valuable. Rather, I intend to bridge these two sets of perspectives on voice and identity. And, I offer these writings *as* theory, as ways of knowing and being.

The scholars whose publications I reviewed voice rich insight into the very questions that critical organizational communication scholars seek to understand about power, voice, identity, and organizing. Moreover, they imply, prescribe, and describe action, something that critical scholars rarely accomplish, even though it's a primary goal of our endeavors. These voices are infused with the critical theoretical concepts in organizational communication studies that I outlined, including resistance, compliance, emotion, silence, standpoint epistemology, dissent, and feminist values. These voices offer counter-hegemonic ways of knowing and being related to diverse (yet related) aspects of academia, including formal and informal socialization processes for students and faculty, teaching and learning, research and publication processes, and various personnel practices. I hope that they will challenge some of your assumptions and expectations about life in the academy. Moreover, if you are a member of any non-dominant group(s), I hope that these voices will affirm and encourage you. Finally, I hope that these voices will motivate us all to identify and change any attitudes and behaviors that may be impeding us from creating and sustaining humane, inclusive climates within our academic homes.

As you read the quotes, please suspend any reaction that they represent unique, isolated instances. Rather, receive them as exemplars of innumerable, comparable experiences. I can attest to their veracity, based on my experiences across a quarter of a century as an outsider-within the academy whose scholarship focuses on social identity and organizational socialization, and who has traversed various levels of the hierarchy (from part-time doctoral student to lecturer to full professor) and served in assorted other roles at several institutions of higher education, within NCA and the Western States Communication Association, as an educational consultant, and as a mentor and confidante. Moreover, although these publications refer to experiences of scholars of color and their allies, they also represent similar experiences of scholars from other traditionally marginalized groups, including: women; persons with disabilities; individuals from working class backgrounds; immigrants; and, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons. Finally, as you will see, these examples epitomize how scholar of rhetoric Eric King Watts characterizes voice: “a particular kind of speech phenomenon that pronounces the ethical problems and obligations incumbent in community building and arouses in persons and groups the frustrations, sufferings, and joys of such commitments.”⁵²

Themes

Space constraints prevent a thorough overview of themes and examples from this abundant body of work. Therefore, I offer two broad themes that represent recurring issues that are especially relevant to this study: enacting power and voice, and enduring challenges of negotiating identity.

Enacting power and voice.

The essays offer ample evidence of scholars' knowledge about conceptualizations of power and voice, and how they relate to or affect their attitudes and behaviors, and others'. Most of these scholars are committed to resisting power dynamics in higher education and society-at-large through their teaching, research, and service. For instance, Kent Ono asserts: "Part of what I want to do as a teacher is to cultivate courageous voices that successfully speak in the face of oppression."⁵³ They often assert a sense of ethical responsibility connected with awareness of ways they are privileged, even as they simultaneously negotiate oppressive dominant ideologies. For instance, some scholars of color refer to the privilege of being able to speak out against domination, as well as privileges associated with dominant categories of identity such as being heterosexual, middle class, and able-bodied.⁵⁴ As the examples below illustrate, many of the scholars report or imply that learning about various theoretical perspectives on power (e.g., critical theory, critical race theory, Chicana feminism, black feminist standpoint theory, poststructural feminism, queer theory, postcolonial theory) helped to raise their consciousness. And, many of them actively incorporate this knowledge into their research and teaching. They also employ critical perspectives to analyze their experiences within the academy.

"I've come to realize that though I have always lived Chicana theory, I did not understand its power until I began teaching Chicana feminism."⁵⁵

Returning to my academic introduction to critical understandings of identity, the most valuable lesson that I learned was that I could write about people who look like me in transparent, humanizing, and resistant ways. To be frank, this possibility brought tears to my eyes because if it were true, I could become an academic without having to leave the politically incorrect/taboo/prohibited pieces of me behind. . . the critical paradigm offered me an invitation to develop a new understanding of who I am, my movement through the world, and how I might become a bona fide academic scholar.⁵⁶

It was my continuous frustration with traditional intercultural communication research's inability to accurately name my experience that led me to search for a way to make sense of my lived reality. These frustrations ultimately led me to a critical epistemology.⁵⁷

"I am not asking to be embraced by the discipline if such an embrace involves the expectation of assimilation. . . individuals with a critical gaze should be sought after and recognized as assets rather than viewed as liabilities."⁵⁸

Some scholars refer to complex ways that identity and voice are tied to "ideological systems of meaning that empower and at the same time constrain us."⁵⁹ They also indicate awareness of voice as a social construction over which they have some agency that can allow them to resist power.

"I navigate my own voices between many different strategic identities that allow me to speak in different ways."⁶⁰

“A severed tongue does not grow back, but it can speak in new ways.”⁶¹

“I did not find my voice alone; I was supported in my efforts to do so. What would have happened to me without such encouragement?”⁶²

This game of the voices has everything to do with how we understand ourselves, our social identities, and how others understand who we are; voices influence the material. Because we cannot follow or will not follow all of the rules of a language, we sometimes silence ourselves in that language.⁶³

“When we are silent too often we start to lose our voices, our ability to speak out in defiance of mistreatment, of degradation, of humiliation, and of pain inflicted on our and others’ bodies.”⁶⁴

“Any chorus of conscience will have to find a way to make space for discordant voices.”⁶⁵

“Searching for voices that are not already in our heads may help us to cross many social barriers.”⁶⁶

Finally, some of them seem to anticipate the recurrent assumption that scholars of color represent and speak for their race or ethnic group, and they offer caveats to that effect:

“I do not claim to speak for anyone other than myself, but I dedicate this effort to those for whom my voice resonates.”⁶⁷

“I have an obligation to make sure people do not think my voice replaces voices of other people like me.”⁶⁸

Enduring challenges of negotiating identity.

The scholars frequently elucidate frustrating experiences related to constructing and performing identity. Many of them provide examples of power-laden co-cultural⁶⁹ exchanges. Some of them describe taxing interactions with other persons of color that evoke dilemmas related to being both a person of color and a member of a profession (and society) infused with whiteness. Among those who study race, some refer to challenges of assuming and fulfilling that scholarly identity through such pivotal activities as conducting, presenting, and publishing research. In addition, several discuss tensions associated with embodying multiple marginalized identities.

. . . my Black presence served as a filter to my knowledge, a barometer of thoughts, and tempered my interactions with those who would:

have me to ACT or not ACT—Black.

As if Black is equated with being militant and antisocial;

as if Black equals anti-White;

as if Black is being the oppressed and the oppressor.

Or those folks who would wish me to engage in *race talk* in hushed tones—

the sanitized talk of academia for their ease.

When in fact, the scathing edges of their articulate tongues have often left me silenced and bleeding; as if that is not a performance of race or culture.⁷⁰

Whether it be the continual complicity manifesting itself through silence from others who would be allies in the fight against inequality, but have the privilege of choice, I am tired. However, I am the most tired of the blatant challenges to my presence. I *hate* the high-ranking administrator in my college who each time we meet asks if I have a PhD. In introductions to prospective students of color at recruiting functions she always introduces my colleagues as Doctor or Professor while calling me by my first name. Each time she does this I am embarrassed and angered, feeling used once again. The demand to be both exemplary of diversity and yet “in my place” is taxing. Tired of being exemplary and exceptional, for one moment I would like to know what it feels like to be “normal” like the majority of my colleagues.⁷¹

When one is Brown and possessed of a not easily anglicized or, for some, pronounceable name, it is easy to be located in a category other than mainstream. Indeed, I clearly recall the first instance of (mis)categorization I experienced in moving to Iowa, that moment when my Anglo adviser introduced himself and asked me if I was Hispanic, a militant Chicano, or something else.⁷²

“I was the angry woman of color before I even opened my mouth.”⁷³

In my coloredness/foreignness [as a South Asian woman], I am seen as an authority on culture. This stance both empowers me by creating a space from which I can engage my voice and trivializes me because my legitimacy as a scholar is couched in my presence, my body, not in my learning.⁷⁴

. . . if only for a short period of time, my voice was silenced: by black people who saw my work as a threat to essentialized notions of domination and subordination that sustained a victim = victimizer dichotomy, and by white people who saw me as a threat to the assumption, sometimes unconscious and often unspoken, that black people are intellectually inferior.⁷⁵

I wonder where and how I enter into discourse whenever I am asked to speak as an “Asian American.” On the one hand, I am always already speaking as an Asian American whenever I am a speaking subject, my position marked by contemporary cultural politics. What would it mean to speak as a non-Asian American?⁷⁶

I wallowed in isolation as I read, re-read, and tried diligently to address the stinging evaluations of race-related work by people who largely felt as if the work was unproductive (“ungeneralizable”), unscholarly (one reviewer called my work “journalistic”), or incomplete by itself (“why didn’t you use Whites as a comparative group?”).⁷⁷

Time and again, reviewers ask me to account for why the phenomena I describe should be examined through a racial lens rather than a class-based one despite large volumes of (cited) literature that challenge the simple conflation of systemic racism with class discrimination.⁷⁹

Although numerous questions ultimately were asked of me by some research participants, fellow graduate students, and professors during and after the dissertation research project [on professor race and credibility], the most prevalent and provocative was, “Do you think that being Black introduced bias into your research?” The answer to that question is certainly no more so than being White introduces bias into the research of Whites who study Whites.⁸⁰

“A white female senior faculty member said to me, ‘Chris, I’m a little concerned with you studying white kids. I mean a white guy who studies white people just doesn’t make sense.’”⁸¹

I was: (a) told I’d never find work as a White scholar doing work on diversity “because those jobs go to people of color;” (b) questioned and criticized for choosing an advisor of color rather than choosing another White faculty member who specialized more directly in critical theory and (c) told that there probably wouldn’t “be a market” for my dissertation to be published as a book by a faculty member who only weeks before had been encouraging me to publish the study before I applied the frame of racial analysis. . . .⁸²

I have played with the ordering of my identity:

Black Gay Man — signals my hierarchical allegiance to my Black heritage.

Gay Black Man — signals my sexual identity which precedes and subverts the sometimes pathologized hyper-heterosexual images of Black men, marking my difference.

Man Black Gay — the least of the efforts which places design over desire and collectivizes me with all other men, who are ultimately unequal except in some biblical reading or in a skewed democratic ideal. . . . I embrace myself as a Black/Man/Gay and celebrate the problematic and glorious intersection of that positionality.⁸³

I hungered for the opportunity to find community in our shared brownness and queerness, in our desire to use our own voices to push back against erasure. I had learned most of what I knew about culture and communication from white and heterosexual allies; like Calafell (2010b)⁸⁴, I awaited an opportunity to theorize *shared* experiences with racism and heterosexism.⁸⁵

In conclusion, my analysis of communication scholarship about voice reveals rich insight about how to effect social change within the academy. To share a shining example, I close this section with a quote from John Warren, a champion for equity who died earlier this year. In his book entitled *Performing purity: Whiteness, pedagogy, and the reconstitution of power*, he characterized his positionality and his work as a white scholar:

It is an ethical position that does not deny scholars of color who preceded my voice, but adds my critical voice in harmony with those voices – to attempt to speak a language that moves people constituted in whiteness from a place of ignorance to a place where people question themselves, and their world. This is my ethical responsibility.⁸⁶

Krishna Pattisapu and Bernadette Marie Calafell -- self-identified queer scholars of color -- evoke John Warren's commitment in an essay entitled "Academic Families of Choice: Queer Relationality, Mentoring, and Critical Communication Pedagogy":

John's voice speaks in and through all of us, encouraging us to negotiate our different and shared identities in the way strong families would during times of struggle. . . We ask you to join us in this mission so that we might all gain access to voice, so that we might speak across identity lines, helping us feel a little less like strangers to one another and a little more like family.

Most of the other authors I cited also invite dialogue and express hope for cocreating the academy as "a more liberating and humane space for us all."⁸⁷ As I discuss next, lessons emerged from this body of work that can help us to speak across identity lines, and guide our efforts to effect social change within higher education.

Lessons Learned

The purpose of this exploratory study was to review communication scholarship about voice to discern lessons for effecting social change in higher education. An analysis of related literature from critical organizational communication scholars and themes from reflexive writing by scholars of color and their allies yielded two primary lessons. The first and most striking finding is that these two bodies of work complement one another. The reflexive publications about experiences in the academy impart compelling answers to questions that organizational communication scholars have posed about power dynamics, such as:

How can we as organizational communication scholars provide insight into the practices of traditionally marginalized groups or forms of organizing? How can we show from a communication perspective that what appears natural and normal about organizational practices is actually socially constructed and obscures other organizational possibilities?⁸⁸

The authors offer multiple examples of oppressive and inclusive interactions and experiences within the academy that can inform organizational communication theory and practice (especially ways that we interact with one another in the academy). Moreover, this set of publications contains a wealth of informative "data" and theory relevant to **every one** of the perspectives on voice in critical organizational communication studies that I outlined above, including critiques. Again, space constraints prohibit me from discussing these. However, I must note that several articles about experiences with editors and manuscript reviewers imply direction for social change; these merit being compiled and disseminated to current and aspiring journal editors.

Although these two bodies of work seem to exist independent of one another, with only a few exceptions,⁸⁹ they show strong potential for reciprocal productivity. Specifically, they can inform praxis, or "transformative social practice"⁹⁰ that puts theory into action. For example, many of scholars of color and their allies refer to emotions and

emotionality in ways that enliven Putnam and Mumby's concept of bounded emotionality, and substantiate their ideas regarding the positive potential of emotions for organizational change. Although this theory provides insight for how to study and integrate emotions, most research related to power is relatively devoid of emotions and rarely prescribes action. Among the publications that I read is an intriguing concept that suggests a way to act upon Putnam and Mumby's claim that "consciousness of other people's feelings is a key to perceptual awareness and developing an understanding of diversity in the workplace."⁹¹ Critical intercultural communication scholar Rachel Griffin invites academics to engage in "critical love," which she describes as "an act of intimacy that can compel listening, reflexivity, and humility to bridge differences."⁹² She elaborates:

I am not proposing a 'let's all hold hands and bite our tongues for the sake of peace' sense of love, nor is love being positioned as a fountain of endless optimism that dismisses the anguish of oppression. Rather, an ethic of care rooted in critical love supports humanization, dialogue, and strong emotions such as fear, frustration, and anger. This type of love recognizes the pride and pain of humanness at the intersections of complex identities; it bears witness to ignorance, pain, suffering, suspicion, distrust, and conflict; and it allows for ugly—meaning acrimonious, crazy, and cynical—discourse.⁹³

Among ways to enact critical love, she urges us to "narrate and simultaneously embody by example the significance of loving across identity differences,"⁹⁴ and to "recognize that the ways we speak and treat each other during everyday communicative encounters matters."⁹⁵ She concludes that enacting critical love can help us build "academic spaces that are more participatory and inclusive."⁹⁶

My second lesson is that a profusion of publications exists about experiences of communication scholars of color in academia. Although I was aware of several such publications, I was surprised to find many more than I anticipated. As I explain later, I believe that they comprise a valuable resource for effecting change in higher education. However, they may not be circulated much, due in part to power dynamics such as negative connotations about reflexive or autoethnographic writing, as well as tendencies to essentialize and compartmentalize such work as being only about race or ethnicity rather than also recognize its contributions to broader areas of scholarship.⁹⁷ What seems to be a disproportionate number of reflexive publications by scholars of color also probably reflects hegemonic processes that take white scholars' racial identity for granted, while often socializing scholars of color toward a heightened sense of self-reflexivity.⁹⁸ Combined with the themes that I discerned, these two lessons helped me to generate several ideas for how we might apply them to effect change in higher education.

Next Steps

I encourage you to reflect on what I have shared to discern lesson(s) you might apply to effect social change in your role(s) in higher education. For example, I learned that I need to become more informed about experiences and concerns of colleagues and students who are not natives of the United States. Related to that, I need to incorporate

postcolonial voices and theories on organizing as well as scholarship from countries (especially so-called third world nations) external to the United States in my teaching and research, and I will do so. I also recognized the vital value of critical theories as tools for empowerment and resistance in the academy, as many scholars drew upon them to identify, analyze, and articulate their experiences and concerns, and to strive to effect change. Therefore, I will continue to incorporate critical theories (especially in teaching, research, and mentoring), and I encourage you to do the same.

Please read (or re-read) some of the publications by scholars of color and their allies, as well as other reflexive writings by, about, and for, scholars on the margins. As and after you read them, please be mindful of your thoughts and feelings, and receptive to ways that you might be *thinking under the influence* of dominant belief systems.⁹⁹ Accept any insights as lessons.

Consider using these and similar publications as resources for various aspects of teaching, research, service, and practice (including how you interact with others and “others” in the academy). They can be helpful for: your own personal and professional development; formal and informal professional development and mentoring for colleagues and graduate students within your departments as well as for other departments or units within your institution; manuscript review processes; and as assignments for a variety of courses (including but not limited to research methods, organizational communication, intercultural communication, and interpersonal communication). For the latter, do not always feel obligated to segregate these readings into units or sessions designated to explore diversity; rather, also infuse them across a course. For example, in a research course, include them to exemplify reflexive scholarship, or in an organizational communication class, to illustrate power dynamics or socialization processes. If you feel uncomfortable assigning such materials, consider consulting websites devoted to teaching diversity for guidance.¹⁰⁰

A theme that I didn’t have space to explore refers to ways that many scholars of color form and rely upon alliances with members of dominant groups as well as other non-dominant ones. Such alliances help to generate richly-nuanced and useful analyses, and they can be sources of empowerment and affirmation. Thus, I recommend that you develop and sustain such alliances for research, teaching, and service..

I also encourage research alliances to further investigate complementary topics that this study revealed between organizational communication and reflexive scholarship about life in the academy. Contact me if you’d like to explore such partnerships.

NCA officers Richard West and Steve Beebe have agreed to provide a follow up session at next year’s NCA convention (2012). Please email me ideas for what we might do for that session: Brenda.J.Allen@ucdenver.edu.

Finally, I invite you to participate in a follow up project that asks you to read and respond to one of the reflexive essays I consulted: an article by Kent Ono (1997) entitled, *A letter/essay I’ve been longing to write in my personal/academic voice*. For instructions, please visit www.differencematters.info.

In conclusion, here I am, invited once again to be a soloist. This time, as contrasted with when I was in the 7th grade, I have been more reflective and reflexive about the opportunity. This time, I am singing in my own voice, which has been shaped by diverse sources of knowledge to which I have been exposed through formal and informal education and experiences. This time, with a raised consciousness gained from espoused theories about power within my area of study, I have written my own song. This time, I have tuned into countless other voices to share insights about power and voice in higher education.

Furthermore, as I reflect on my experience with Mr. Hatch, I can readily apply Rachel Griffin's concept of critical love. If Mr. Hatch and I had dialogued across our differences in race, class, age, gender, and level of education, perhaps I would have told him that the soprano line didn't feel natural, and that I didn't want to sing that song because I couldn't relate to it. Maybe he would have explained that he chose me because I have an extraordinary soprano voice that, if cultivated, would lead me to become a phenomenal opera singer (I can dream, can't I?). Maybe he would have explained that he chose the song because it is a Negro spiritual, which black slaves in the United States often used as codes to communicate with one another. That could have marked a turning point in my life. Rather than becoming a critical scholar of organizational communication, I might have become a famous opera singer. Oh well, that didn't happen. Instead, I am pleased and privileged that my life has led me to this moment of sharing with you what I have learned about voice, identity, and communication, and to encourage you to apply these voice lessons to effect social change in higher education.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁸ In actuality, poor women of all races have always worked; however, the concerns arose mainly because white middle class women were aspiring to enter the workforce. Similarly, concerns about women and men of color stemmed from their intent to obtain jobs in occupations traditionally reserved for white men. Allen, B.J. (2001). Gender, race, and communication in professional environments. In: L. P.Arliss and D. Borisoff (Eds.) *Women and men communicating: Challenges and changes* (pp. 212-231). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.

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- ²² Mumby & Putnam, p. 474.
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- ²⁹ Mumby & Stohl, p. 58.
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- ⁴⁶ Mumby & Stohl, p. 277.
- ⁴⁷ Mumby & Stohl, p. 278.
- ⁴⁸ Nicotera, A. M. (1999). Woman academic as subject/object/self: Dismantling the illusion of duality. *Communication Theory*, 9 (4), 430-464.

- ⁴⁹ Wherein an author critically and openly reflects upon and analyzes her/his “storied understandings” of personal experiences within certain contexts. Miller, D. M. (2008). Shades of gray: An autoethnographic study of race in the academy. *International Journal Of Qualitative Studies In Education (QSE)*, 21(4), 347-373.
- ⁵⁰ I conducted a search of the Communication and Mass Media database using combinations of keywords and subject terms: “voice,” “higher education,” “autoethnography,” “academy,” “race,” “ethnicity,” and “reflexivity.” I also analyzed articles with which I was familiar, and I mined bibliographies of related publications. In addition, I referred to two manuscripts from an unpublished edited volume for which I wrote the foreword. The editors granted me permission to cite this work. Within this manuscript, I cite only the publications that I quote. For a complete list of articles, please visit: www.differencematters.info. Please note that I do not wish to imply that all of the articles equal; as in any set of publications, they vary in quality. However, they all contribute invaluable insight. Many of the articles were published in special issues of communication journals, which suggests that some editors recognized a need to solicit such writing, and that they were willing to share their power as disseminators of knowledge.
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- ⁶⁹ Interactions between members of dominant and non-dominant groups. See, Orbe, M. (1998). *Constructing co-cultural theory: An explication of culture, power, and communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
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- ⁷⁵ McPhail, p. 166.
- ⁷⁶ Nakayama, 2005, p. 67.
- ⁷⁷ Orbe, M. P., Smith, D. C., Groscurth, C. R., & Crawley, R. L. (2010). Exhaling so that we can catch our breath and sing: Reflections on issues inherent in publishing race-related communication research. *Southern Communication Journal, 75(2)*, 184-194, p. 186.
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- ⁸⁰ Hendrix, 2005, p. 330.
- ⁸¹ Orbe, et al., p. 186.
- ⁸² Simpson, pp. 152-3
- ⁸³ Alexander, p. 23.
- ⁸⁴ Calafell, B. M. (2010). Notes from an 'angry woman of color': Academic policing and disciplining women of color in a post (fill in the blank) era. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 34*, 240-245.
- ⁸⁵ Pattisapu, K., & Calafell, B. (unpublished manuscript). Academic Families of Choice: Queer Relationality, Mentoring, and Critical Communication Pedagogy. In: N. Bardhan and M. Orbe (Eds.). *Identity research in intercultural communication*, p. 76.
- ⁸⁶ Warren, J. T. (2003). *Performing purity: Whiteness, pedagogy, and the reconstitution of power*. New York: Peter Lang, p. 57.
- ⁸⁷ Johnson & Bhatt, p. 242.
- ⁸⁸ Mumby & Stohl, 1996, p. 58.
- ⁸⁹ For instance, many of my publications apply critical perspectives to reflexively analyze and critique organizing practices in higher education.
- ⁹⁰ Ganesh, S. (2009). Critical organizational communication. In: St. W. Littlejohn and K.A. Foss (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, pp. 226-231. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, p. 228.

- ⁹¹ Mumby & Putnam, p. 480.
- ⁹² Griffin (unpublished manuscript), p. 303.
- ⁹³ Griffin, p. 298.
- ⁹⁴ Griffin, p. 301.
- ⁹⁵ Griffin, p. 303.
- ⁹⁶ Griffin, p. 303.
- ⁹⁷ Calafell & Moreman, 2009.
- ⁹⁸ See, Hendrix, 2005.
- ⁹⁹ See, Allen, 2011, pp. 186-189
- ¹⁰⁰ See, for example, www.differencematters.info

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