

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**  
**MOVING TOWARD NCA'S 100<sup>TH</sup>: WHAT TIES CARRY AND KEEP US TOGETHER?**

Dawn O. Braithwaite, Ph.D.  
Willa Cather Professor of Communication, University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
President, National Communication Association  
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Greetings to all of you, my colleagues from the National Communication Association, especially to the winners of our association's highest awards who are with us here today. I especially think of our colleague Brant Burluson who is very ill and unable to receive his award in person. We were able to Skype in into the meeting and, as he said so eloquently, "Aren't we the luckiest people to be able to study and teach about communication?"

My congratulations and heartfelt gratitude goes to all those who made this San Francisco convention possible, especially First Vice President Lynn Turner and our Convention Manager Michelle Randall. I thank all of the association's volunteers—NCA runs on the expertise, commitment, and generosity of a legion of volunteer leaders. Finally, I recognize all of the NCA Past Presidents who are here today. Thank for your continued leadership and wisdom.

Thank you for the incredible honor of serving as your President. I appreciate the colleagues with whom I have worked during my years in NCA leadership, especially those on the Executive Committee with whom I work the most closely. While we have our own discursive struggles at times, the association is better for it. I challenge anyone to find a group of people who care more deeply about the association and discipline. I appreciate the staff at the NCA National Office in Washington DC for all they do for us. I am continually impressed with what just 14 people can accomplish.

I am indebted to my colleagues and students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for their encouragement and understanding these past several busy years, especially my Department Chair Bill Seiler whose friendship meant so much. I am incredibly grateful to my close friends and for their love and support. I want to publicly thank my husband Chuck Braithwaite who has given so much, especially during these very demanding years. Chuck, you are the best.

When I was NCA First Vice President last year, one of my duties was to choose the theme for the 2009 convention. I chose, “Discourses of Stability and Change” which is a fitting theme for a dialectical theorist and one that I think is very relevant to our association now and as NCA moves toward our centennial coming up in 2014.

I have also come to realize that this theme of “Discourses of Stability and Change” has aptly described my time in NCA leadership. I have come to realize what I imagine every President has experienced in his or her own way—that leading the association is hardly ever easy. Of course, when all is said and done, none of us was very surprised by that. All of us expected to work hard and we knew there would be challenges of course. However, if you talk with Past Presidents, I imagine you would hear that few of us had anticipated the issues that would crop up during our time in leadership that would turn out to frame important contributions we made-- those issues that stretched to the limit our intellect and skills, that cost us sleep and rewarded us with more gray hair. I cannot imagine that any leader does not look back at his or her accomplishments without confronting their shortcomings square in the face. Ultimately, each of us can only hope that in some small measure we helped to make things better.

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In her Arnold Lecture last year, Leslie Baxter explained that her work in relational dialectics has taken a decidedly critical turn. She explained that the critical turn in relational dialectics is not about contradictions, but *discourses*, and she shines a light on discursive struggles of relating. These struggles are not bad or to be avoided, rather they are the reality that we navigate and co-create in interaction. The critical turn comes when we engage in discursive struggles over which discourses are privileged and which discourses are silenced or rejected. In our research, Leslie and I have critiqued communication theories that have privileged certainty over uncertainty—viewing uncertainty as something to be reduced. We have also have critiqued our approaches to research that have privileged seeking similarity over navigating difference. In contrast, we have argued that we are at our best when we *embrace* discourses of uncertainty and difference.

As I have served on the Executive Committee these last six years I have come to better understand the critical turn of relational dialectics in the association--at times way more than I

wanted to. Yet, any difficulties I have encountered are far outweighed by feelings of pride, positivity, and hopefulness about NCA and our discipline.

In my short talk today I want to go back to the time our association was founded and examine the discourses that emerged from very start. Along the way I will briefly highlight the two discourses of uncertainty and difference, as I believe navigating these represent our greatest strengths and challenge.

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I have always been interested in the history of our discipline and association. This knowledge has greatly influenced how I think about and understand myself as a scholar and teacher and was one of my most helpful preparations to serve as NCA President. We do not become who and what we are in a vacuum. As individual scholars and teachers, as universities and departments, as disciplines and associations, we are wise to understand our development over time.

Let's begin now with a little quiz: How many names has NCA had since 1914? \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, Five! Each time we changed our name, we did it for a reason of course. Do you know the five names? My students do. I don't have time to recount their story today, but suffice it to say that each name change reflected a move forward in who we are and how we understand ourselves.

### **Our Beginnings**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there were a few departments of Speech, but not many. Faculty members taught public speaking at universities in English departments, for the most part.

On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our association in 1964, Giles Wilkerson Gray, then Editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, talked about the plight of the public speaking teachers in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The public speaking teachers were increasingly dissatisfied with how they were being treated in English and their frustrations culminated in a revolt on a November day in Chicago in 1913 at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE):

It was the clash of the two divergent points of view within the National Council [of Teachers of English] that led to the final rebellion. One group held that speech and English were essentially identical.... Another group held with equal insistence that, while English and speech had much in common...there were also points of no contact...

In his excellent book, *Democracy as Discussion* (2007), Bill Keith quotes James Winans of Cornell University, who described the culture of isolation in which public speaking teachers operated. Winans recalled,

.... each teacher stayed in his own little corner, hugging onto his own “pet system,” and believing all the other fellows were nitwits and freaks.... His own extreme insistence upon his own little system of eternal truth was probably in part due to the fact that he had an inferiority complex. His own community jeered at him, or at best ignored him as a one who had nothing of consequence, and to maintain self-respect he had to insist constantly that he had something very precious....

Winans explained why attending conferences was so important to these early public speaking teachers, describing, “He was often a lonely soul for lack of colleagues who took a lively interest in his work...hence conferences filled a real need.”

James O’Neill, who became the first president of our association, gave a speech at the 1913 meeting of NCTE. O’Neill was responding to a speech given by an English professor the year before:

The speaker took the position that the only hope for the future of teaching of public speaking was to have it completely under the English department, with well trained teachers of English giving such instruction. I claimed that about the only academically respectable work in public speaking was being done by teachers who were “on their own,” wholly independent of the English departments or any other department. What we needed was independent departments, an independent professional organization, a professional journal, teacher training, and graduate work. As I was talking I knew I was getting what is known as a “mixed reception,” which was what I expected. I concluded with a quotation from Mr. Dooley, “If I’ve said anything that I’m sorry for, I’m glad of

it.”.... I am still glad...that I made that speech in 1913, which failed to please the majority of my audience.

By the 1913 NCTE meeting, dissatisfaction with English had clearly increased. The public speaking teachers asked NCTE for conference programming presented by “one of their own.” Their request was denied. The next day a committee was appointed to explore forming their own national professional association (and I note here that what would become the Eastern Communication Association had started a few years before). At this meeting, 17 members adopted a resolution to withdraw from NCTE and established our first name: National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking.

Once the association was founded the challenges had only begun. What would be the mission of this new association and discipline? I highly recommend Herman Cohen’s *The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline 1914-1945*, if you have not read it. Cohen presents a detailed account of the ensuing debates on what the discipline should be. He explained:

The Association, however, faced a fundamental problem in meeting its objective; members of the profession had done no research, and it is not at all clear that they knew what research was or how to conduct it.... In contrast to most of the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, public speaking had begun as a “performance field” with little or no theoretical background and it was now seeking the means to become a research field.” (p. 36)

Several members of the association’s first Research Committee recommended a push toward “pure science,” as in sociology and psychology. Cohen argues that these early debates had a longstanding effect on our discipline. Even today, arguments persist about whether we have borrowed too many of our theories and research methods from other disciplines. We are still trying to figure out whether this is a weakness of our discipline or a testament to our strong interdisciplinarity.

Cohen also chronicles at length the arguments that raged on in the early association about the

tensions between research and teaching. He plays out an extended discussion by Everett Hunt and James Winans about whether research had any place in the discipline. Hunt envisioned public speaking as a teaching field. Winans and others argued for the importance of research if, for no other reason, that research was the ticket to respectability for the new discipline. The other debate raged over which research paradigm should guide the new discipline. While our roots coming out of English were in humanistic approaches, others argued for social science. Charles Woolbert joined into the argument, taking on Hunt. Woolbert would earn his Ph.D. in Psychology from Harvard and saw the move to social science as a way to distance from English.

These early discussions are fascinating and important. The early members had public speaking classes to teach and now an association, but this fledgling discipline (if one could call it that) lacked research. They did not have a clear vision between social science and humanities, if to do research and how, and no theoretical base from which to work. They were clearly going to need to import the best they could from other disciplines-- rhetoric, history, education, sociology, and psychology, among others. It must have been an exciting, daunting, and terribly confusing time. One of the most interesting sections in Herm Cohen's book is a well-developed argument concerning how we became so reliant on the methods and theories from psychology, and he explains Woolbert's central role in this development. Cohen also references Mary Yost, who was arguably the first person in the new association to earn a Ph.D., hers in sociology. She gave us one of the earliest models of human communication and argued to shift the focus to the group and social situation, but at the time was drowned out by the others.

These early discussions formed the basis for our growth as a discipline as well as many of our greatest challenges in the years to come, even today. We still struggle with what we should be studying and how. Teaching or research? Humanities or social science? Unique or interdisciplinary? In his opening talk in the state of the discipline on Sunday night, David Zarefsky helped us ponder our current thinking on these questions. The dialectical theorist in me of course says—not “either-or” but “both-and.” In many ways, our debates rage on.

Just this small amount of disciplinary history tells me quite a bit about us:

*We were born of rebellion.* Our founders were not satisfied with the status quo; they wanted change.

*We were born of risk and sacrifice.* It would have been much safer and easier to stay in the English department and association rather than strike out and create something new.

*We were born of the belief that there was something unique about speech.* Our founders knew speech was more than an English essay on its feet.

*We were born of insecurity.* We descend from people who lacked confidence and had something to prove.

*We were born of professional isolation.* We descend from people who needed to affiliate.

As I look at our history--rebellion, risk and sacrifice, belief in something unique and worth studying, our insecurity and isolation, I see parallels and lessons in each of these pillars on which we began. Those of you who know me know that I do like to find the positives in life. I cannot say that this is always easy to do. However, I do see the challenges of our past as a way to help us understand our challenges in the present and to help us create our desired future.

In the time that I have left with you today I will focus on two dialectical discourses that I believe challenge us today and as we move toward our centennial: “Navigating Discourses of Uncertainty: What is Our Impetus to Relate?” and “Navigating Discourses of Difference: Around What Do We Cohere?”

### **Navigating Discourses of Uncertainty: What is Our Impetus to Relate?**

In thinking about this first dialectical discourse, Navigating Discourses of Uncertainty: What is Our Impetus to Relate, I cannot help but be influenced by my standpoint as a relational communication teacher and scholar. To me, one of the great lessons from our association’s history is how important it was for our founders to associate. I cannot but think that leaving the certainty of the English association was a risky thing to do and I cannot imagine their rebellion did not bleed over into daily life in their departmental homes as they returned from that NCTE convention in 1913. Our founders were clearly tired of feeling isolated and like second-class

citizens and they were willing to embrace uncertainty and sacrifice to be together with likeminded people.

What about today? We have the comfort of our own university programs and our large and healthy association, because of the courage of the founders' convictions and sacrifices. Unlike the situation in 1914, today we have so many choices to make—whether to join our professional associations and which ones to join. Given the large number of journal outlets, we choose where to submit our best scholarship. We decide whether spend the time and money to travel to conventions. We look for certainty in our professional relationships and I think sometimes it is easy to take our professional associations for granted, let a membership slip for a year or two because we can get our journals electronically, or to drop a membership altogether when an association disappoints or angers us for any number of reasons.

For me, I am a member of all of my professional associations—NCA, WSCA, CSCA, ICA, and specialized associations related to my area of study because of the their support of my scholarship and because I believe it is important that we support their goals. However I elevate my membership in NCA and I put my identity and my membership at NCA because of *relationships*. I am thinking about “relationships” in two different ways here. First, with all due respect to my other associations—*NCA is the place where I establish my strongest relationship to the discipline*. It is the association that publishes the largest number and diversity of journals, provides support and professional development for us as teachers, provides program guidelines, outreach, and advocacy for the discipline, and supports the breadth of the career—student clubs for undergraduates, job search support for graduate students, awards that advance careers, a place for administrators to meet, and support for retired and emeritus members. The list could go on and on. While all of the associations make an important contribution, NCA is, in my mind, *the keeper of the discipline* in this way.

Second, *NCA is the place where I have the greatest number of personal and professional relationships in the discipline*. I hold as precious the personal and professional relationships my membership in the discipline affords me and NCA is the association where the greatest number

of together and associate. Our annual NCA convention is one aspect of this opportunity to related and where I'll be able to interact with people from across the breadth of the discipline.

Each year I look forward to coming to the annual convention—yes it is big and unwieldy at times—but where else am I going to be able to celebrate the relationships that my membership in the discipline brings? Where else am I going to be able to connect to the breadth of scholars whose work I admire? How else am I going to be able to be the most available to meet and talk with those who might benefit from my scholarship and input? How else am I going to meaningfully enact my membership in the discipline?

I look around this room tonight and see so many people who are important to me. As I prepared this talk I thought about all of my dear professors and mentors who have contributed so much to my life and career. Every year I look forward to the NCA convention to be able to see my mentors, and I imagine you do the same. I think about my community college professors and two of them are here today—Ruth Hunter and Sharon Ratliffe of Golden West College. I met Ruth when I was 18 years old. They represent the faculty who gave me my start, including Sheldon Nyman who invited me as a co-author on what became my very first convention paper while still an undergraduate student.

Dan Canary represents my undergraduate years at California State University Fullerton. Dan was the first Teaching Assistant with whom I worked. I would not be here without him and faculty members like Bob Emry, Lucy Keele, Joyce Flocken, and Norman Page. In addition, I reflect so often about the mentorship of my mentor Wayne Brockriede the incredible Rich Wiseman, both who left us all too soon. Dick Porter is here representing my Masters faculty from California State University Long Beach. Dick has been my “academic dad” for all these years and he represents a great number of faculty members there including Karl Anatol, Earl Cain, and Owen Jensen who meant so much to me. Sandra Petronio is here representing the faculty from my doctoral program at the University of Minnesota. These people helped me become a scholar. I honor Sandra, who has been an incredible mentor and friend, along with Charles Bantz, Bob Scott, Vern Jensen, David Rarick, Judith Martin, George Shapiro and Don Browne. I honor my dear advisor Ernest Bormann to whom I owe so much.

At this point in my career, one of the greatest delights of coming to the NCA convention is to see my former students of whom I am so incredibly proud. You are all a continual joy and blessing to me. When I add to my list of relationships the wonderful colleagues I have met and worked with via the association, it is a bit overwhelming at times. I just cannot imagine my life and career without these relationships. All of you are the biggest reason I come to the NCA convention each year. I want to see all of you. I want to stay up late with my pals and laugh and talk. I want to debate ideas, hear about your work, and learn from all of you.

So for me, I am a member of NCA and my other associations for the *people--the relationships*. After all, I met my dear husband Chuck Braithwaite through the Western States Communication Association and we were engaged at WSCA's 1984 meeting. We were married with the faculty and students from the University of Minnesota around us.

Yes, I admit it. I am an association nerd. But I suspect I am not alone in this room and all of you have similar stories. I will always be grateful to the 17 rebellious and brave souls who walked out in 1913. The association they founded has brought a relational richness to our lives and careers. We will best honor their sacrifice and work by our commitment to the discipline, association, and to each other. To accomplish this, we have to embrace discourses of uncertainty.

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We do have real challenges facing us as an association. We are working to examine best ways to structure and govern the association as we move to the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Right now we have appointed several task forces addressing these issues and have Member Working Committees giving us counsel. We struggle with how to be good members of our association and good citizens in our communities as we think about how and where to hold conventions. We work to best envision what will face us is a certain city or state as we book convention sites 5-7 years in advance. I appreciate the leadership of our Member Working Committee on the Convention, the work of the National Office, and the Executive Committee as we continue to address these issues.

Here we are holding the convention in the midst of a boycott situation. It has not been easy for the association's leadership or our members. We have been working hard to navigate these waters the best we can. I am grateful to those who have contacted us with their concerns, suggestions, and their appreciation. I am especially impressed with the tenor of the discourse of our members surrounding convention site this year. These challenges will not leave us and it will take the best that good minds have to offer as we move forward.

We have to embrace and navigate discourses of uncertainty to stay together. If we wait for certainty—until the association has solved every problem that bothers us or until the conditions are just right—there will be no association. In any given year we will have disagreements about what the association should or should, dear colleagues, it certainly does not let us off the hook *for engaging each other in the most civil ways possible.*

I do challenge NCA members to become involved in leadership of the association and help us address our challenges. And I hope that all NCA members will at least entertain the notion that those volunteers in leadership and our staff in Washington DC are persons of good will—not perfect persons, but ones who are working hard and to the best of our abilities for the good of the association and members. We need all good minds and hearts working to make NCA all it can be. I believe strongly that the success of our discipline depends on it. I hope that we will continue to seek reasons to be members of the association, reasons to come together each year, rather than look for reasons to move apart. I am optimistic and I know it will take a strong collective commitment and effort

### **Navigating Discourses of Difference: Around What Do We Cohere?**

The second dialectical discourse I want to address is: Navigating Discourses of Difference: Around What Do We Cohere? We have certainly come far since 1914 and a disciplinary focus on teaching public speaking. With the incredible breadth of our members, scholarship, and activities, we do need to keep an eye on our central focus as an association and discipline. What makes us unique? Around what do we cohere?

Perhaps no one has addressed this better for me than Bob Craig in his 1999 *Communication Theory* article. In very brief, Craig described our lack of a center as a discipline as we go about our business within smaller knots of scholars most often ignoring each other. He decried that too often “there is no consensus on communication theory as a field” (p. 120). Craig was hopeful, however. He argued that “A field will emerge to the extent that we increasingly engage as communication theorists with socially important goals, questions, and controversies that cut across the various disciplinary traditions, substantive specialties, methodologies, and schools of thought that presently divide us” (p. 120).

Craig challenged us to consider, around what do we cohere as a discipline? He argues for communication as “the primary, constitutive social process” (p. 126). In my own way of thinking about, this constitutive social process is how humans co-construct selves, relationships, organizations, publics and cultures. We can enact our unique contribution to understanding and studying communication only when we negotiate and embrace a dialectic of difference.

In one effort to address this question of coherence, the NCA Research Board sponsored a panel that asked, “What is unique or distinctive about the study of communication?” The outcome of this panel is a 2009 book titled *Distinctive Qualities of Communication Research*, edited by Patrice Buzzanell and Donal Carbaugh. In their introduction, Buzzanell and Carbaugh reflect on the need to address the central question of what binds us together as a discipline:

In an era of budget cuts and surveys of departments’ reputations, deans and administrative leaders sometimes ask what a department of communication offers that is distinctive in its conception and conduct of inquiry. Funding agencies like the National Science Foundation ...read proposals and may ask what a communication study contributes to particular social issues ....A similar exigency is created by a call in many quarters for research teams from multiple disciplines to address a social problem such as AIDS... environmental assessments, or issues of security and privacy. What does a communication researcher add to such a [research] team? Each such moment provides an *opportunity* for communication researchers to say what is *distinctive* about their communication research--its philosophy, theory, methodology, and/or findings.

I believe our scholarship and teaching is best when we focus on the practical implications of communication scholarship in the everyday lives of people in our personal, social, and cultural communities. I was greatly encouraged and challenged to read 2010 joint forum in NCA's *Communication Monographs* and *Journal of Applied Communication Research* on "Has Communication Research Made a Difference?" This kind of introspection can only make us better.

The question of what is *distinctive* about our study of communication is one that all of us should be concerned about. It is not a question I can answer here, but it is one that *we* must continue to ponder and answer as we navigate—and celebrate-- our discourses of uncertainty and difference.

What *does* the future hold for us in the next 100 years? Working on this address, I have tried to envision it. As Hunt, Winans, and Woolbert were verbally slugging it out over questions of how to teach public speaking and whether it was even a subject for research, in their wildest dreams I doubt that they could have conceived of the discipline 100 years down the road. Could they have imagined Communication departments with 400, 800, 1200 majors?

### **Conclusions**

In the end, we can trace the development of the National Communication Association through a series of discursive struggles built, by and large, on moving forward, being inclusive, and seeking to make a difference.

We need to know the history of our national association, as it is central to understanding the disciplinary identity and our place in it. The fact that we have changed names five times in less than 100 years reflects some of our continuing unrest about who we are as a discipline and what we want to become. I think it speaks to some of the insecurity that has plagued us from the beginning, and I believe some of that insecurity continues on today. Despite our struggles and challenges, I can still think of nothing more important to study and teach than communication. I trust you agree.

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What will we become in five years when we reach NCA's centennial? How about at age 125, 150? 200? Will we have a new name? What will we study and teach that we have not even dreamed about? Those of us fortunate enough to be communication scholars and teachers are doing something we know is important to people's personal, professional, and public lives.

We need to overcome our insecurities and embrace our uncertainty and differences. We need to fight to stay together, even when we believe the association has let us down, take personal and collective ownership of our association and discipline, and work to make it better. We need a strong national association and this will be our best way of honoring our past and leaving a strong legacy for those who follow us in the future. I cannot help but believe our future is bright.

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