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<td><strong>Sub Title</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
<td>Dervin, Brenda</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Institute for Communications Research, Keio University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication year</strong></td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jtitle</strong></td>
<td>Keio communication review No.28 (2006. 3), p.19-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genre</strong></td>
<td>Journal Article</td>
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Navigating an Impossible Dream: A Synergy of Possibilities, a Convergence of Constraints

by Brenda Dervin

It is a gross over-simplification but useful to suggest that metaphorically branches of scholarship are architecturally constructed of castles surrounded by moats. The castles are intended to be strong. The moats are wide, protecting as they do the common agreements which define academic discourse communities -- agreements on vocabularies, definitions, classifications, assumptions, primitive terms, normative standards and practices, and foundational definitions on what it is acceptable to study and how (Layder, 1990). This does not imply that practitioners within a particular discourse community have complete consensus. But it does set the outer edges of acceptable disagreement. (Dervin, 2003; Dervin, Shields & Song, 2005)

Necessarily, the infrastructures that link the castles to each other -- the moats and rivers between -- are too often underdeveloped, and treacherous. Why this is so is, of course, the subject of many contentious debates rooted in different theories of how creative social agents (scholars) act in, make sense of, and travel the journeys through time-space that are their scholarly lives, navigating as they must the socially inscribed and buttressed edifices that empower but also constrain the very idea of scholarship as activity.

It is also an over-simplification but useful to suggest that most scholars stay safely inside their castles, inside the discourse communities to which they have been educated and in which they etch out their own places. This makes perfect sense, of course, for we all know it is a hard enough thing to etch a place inside a castle without also taking on the task of constructing a journey along the uncharted moats between castles.

Yet, curiously, the field(s) of communication studies was at least at its inception focused on traveling uncharted roads. When the various departments of communication began to coalesce they brought to them castle-builders who traveled to this new meeting ground from many different origins -- rhetoric, journalism, language studies, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, systems engineering, international development, to name but a few. Each had visions of how castles should be built.

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Each inhabited its own language community, its own discourse. But each shared what in retrospect was an impossible dream -- allegiance to the idea that the “old” disciplines and fields were not adequately zoning in on communication as foundational phenomena. Sociology’s first interest was society; psychology’s the individual personality; anthropology, culture, and so on. Those who gravitated to the “new” communication departments dreamed of making communication the central phenomenon, not a phenomenon on the periphery.

Even as these communication departments were being built, communication itself was becoming at one and the same time a hot topic for study and everybody’s business. Global events were propelling forces -- the rise of media; the increasing human consciousness of the other; the evidence of the impact of communication strategies on world-changing events in Germany, in India, in the Soviet Union; the diminishment of authority as a universally acceptable organizing force for human affairs. One might say that “communication” as a phenomenon worthy of study was an idea whose time had come.

For those of us involved near the beginning -- as I was as a graduate student in one of the founding doctoral programs in communication in the U.S. -- it was an exciting time. Our mentors in the Michigan State University program came from many origins -- cybernetics, sociology, psychology, rhetoric, comparative studies. They all seemed to accept that they each had something to offer the common effort to study communication as a foundational concept. There was a vital intensity afoot. In these early years, my mentors mostly ignored their differences. This was possible at MSU because everyone had seemingly accepted an empirical scientific approach to unearthing causal laws of communication as their common axiological focus. The possibility that there might be those who did not accept the same premises was at best only whispered in the hallways.

Simultaneously, however, there were other communities of communication scholarship being built on different axiological premises and as events evolved and scholarly societies formed, it is fair to say that the up-to-then unstated differences in how different communication researchers and scholars thought it appropriate to study communication imploded. My own journey got entangled in and at the same time was served by this implosion.

Prior to going to graduate school, I was trained as a journalist and worked as a public information officer for a variety of non-profit organizations. Fancying myself a reasonably talented communicator, I intended to devote my career to creating informational messages which improved the lot of average citizens. My well-meaning, albeit naive intentions, collided frequently with the communication mandates of the organizations for which I worked. I saw the top-down transmission oriented mandates of public education organizations as elitist at best. In the 1960s, as a journalist, for example, I wanted to interview women regarding their views after the Papal encyclical on birth control and was told by my editor that women’s opinions
were not important. As a public educator, I was mandated to develop instructions to teach impoverished citizens how to budget their money wisely and as I faced an audience of poor urban city Black Americans I understand in one of those moments of flashing insight that a bunch of well-to-do educators who did not budget their money particularly wisely wanted, as if by magic, poor people to be more perfect human beings than they.

In short, I understand that neither the well-meaning editors nor the well-meaning educators understood how to communicate communicatively. Their communication programs were based on premises of persuasion not dialogue. This is why, I reasoned, they so often failed so miserably. I was convinced, albeit naively, that given sufficient power, persuasion campaigns could be used to produce all manner of deleterious outcomes and occasional beneficial ones but they could not effect long-range improvements of the human condition in the absence of dialogue. In short, I believed then, as I do now, that communication to be communicative must be designed communicatively. In short, communication to be communicative must build bridges between different interpretive/contextual worlds.

At this point, my evidence was primarily intuitive stubbornness. Raised for the early years of my life as an orphan, I had been the object of many well-meaning directives for the betterment of my person. Left to my own thinking devices, I had -- rightly I might add in retrospect -- concluded that these directives were 99.9% wrong. My entire life experience primed me to believe that we had to find ways to communicate communicatively. Now, 40 years later, my conclusion remains the same and is buttressed by mountains of evidence.

By communicating communicatively, I have never meant the explosion of spontaneous people-to-people communicating that, for example, the new technologies now make possible. These modes have strengths and weaknesses -- a subject for a different essay. Rather, my obsession has been with re-inventing communication communicatively -- designing practices and systems which are inherently communicative.

An outsider looking at the trajectory of my work will note that it appears that I have “studied” a vast array of substantive topics in a vast array of contextual arenas. My career trajectory looks like that of a dilettante. In actuality, however, I have studied only one thing -- how to design communication communicatively whether that communication be research (as in studying audiences and users), or practice (as in intersecting with users of information systems), or policy planning (as in constructing policy alternatives to serve citizens well), or campaign design (as in constructing messages to facilitate citizen self-improvement), or community-building (as in conducting research symposia). I have persisted in this central focus despite the fact that, to my great surprise, what most communication scholars want from communication is not dialogue but the enactment of change as it suits their visions of the world. In short, even we communication scholars have difficulty being
communicative.

But the very fact of my saying that should warn the reader that I am, of course, caught in my own worldview. It turns out, an understanding some 45 years in the making, that my vision of communication as dialogic possibility and the competing vision of communication as persuasive instrumentality have an inherently dialectical and paradoxical relationship with each other. If I command you to be communicative, I have, indeed, become persuasive. If you dare to listen, you have become dialogic.

In many ways this one understanding crystallizes for me my years as communication practitioner and researcher. I still am obsessed with re-inventing communication communicatively. I am still appalled at how little both experts and scholars seem to understand what that might mean. But I am humbled by my obsession knowing that it is a more complex and elusive goal than I could have ever imagined and knowing that that knowing is strength.

I share this special section of this journal with other communication scholars who have themselves crossed impossible divides. I am still perplexed by why some people dare to do so -- albeit all too few; and why most people do not. In my own case, I suspect that it was because I was driven by an obsession -- a belief that communication could work better, not perfectly, but better; and because that obsession was driven by life experience.

This obsession led me to act, in fact, in opposition to the best academic practices. I taught myself to attend to these and read voraciously. In the process, of course, I built for myself a home in a shaky boat on the moat between the academic castles. I made being “in-between” my way of being. It is, in fact, a wonder that I survived although I was probably helped by the fact that I was one of the first reasonably well-known females with a PhD in communication in the U.S. And, I was helped by the fact that a field anchored in practice -- library and information science -- found great value in my work and funded, published, and cited it.

It was important that I was able to anchor myself in a field of practice because of all the gaps which I have attempted to cross the one between research/theory and practice has been most central. To redesign communication communicatively is to design practice whether the living practices of daily performance or the practices that are the interstices of organizations and institutions.

As I traveled back and forth between practice and research/theory, I kept running into gaps that few others seemed to be paying attention to. The biggest one for me was the inadequacy of current interviewing/surveying practices for understanding audiences and users. I took the requisite survey research courses and studied the data on interviewing practices and found them wanting. These approaches kept imposing system and expert construed world views on their respondents and thus missed the extraordinary gaps that exist between expert models and lived
The argument, in reply, much repeated, was that people are too unique and we have no choice but to map people to systems. But I persisted in believing that we could design communication communicatively and both efficiently and effectively find ways to map systems to people.

I turned to qualitative research that pursued attentions to uniquenesses but, in turn, found them wanting because while their interviewing approaches were more open-ended they were usually capricious and they unwittingly imposed expert worldviews either in interviewing conduct or data analysis. I concluded that we simply had no theory for the practice of interviewing communicatively. I set out to develop one.

The understanding of the interviewing gap led to what I call my 35 year detour. I wanted to re-design communication and had to start by re-designing that subset of communication that is studying the needs and views of audiences and users so that communication systems and practices could be designed to be responsive. For 35 years I have worked on what is now called the Sense-Making Methodology, a communication based approach to research design, practice, and analysis for studying audiences and users. While I call this work a detour, it is in actuality more an exemplar of the larger goal. Research is communication and hence to re-invent research practice is to re-invent an example of communication practice.

Because I was obsessed and had cast myself into the moat between castles, I paid too little attention to the castles I was peering into as I sailed by. In retrospect I understand that it mattered little what the chronology of my exposure to different academic discourse communities was because I grabbed from each what I found of value and continued on my way. It is fair to say that it wasn’t until I had been an academic for 25 years that I deliberately set out to find and conquer a new discourse community. Up to then, accidents happened and brought with them serendipitous exposures. At Michigan State’s doctoral program it was, for example, primarily non-US males who welcomed me -- a rare female doctoral student -- as friend and on the way introduced me to continental scholarship and the whispered name “Marx.” Searching for a first academic job, it was Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies willing to take a chance on a newly minted female PhD. Then an administrative upheaval there forced me to search again and I ended up at the University of Washington where I found my most important mentor -- Richard F. Carter (2003), the man whom I call “the genius I needed”, a scholar perhaps more obsessed with the idea of re-inventing communication than I. Being one of the first female PhDs in communication, I was in the right place at the right time to be elected the first female president of the International Communication Association. This catapulted me into a world where all approaches to communication scholarship met, and, alas, often -- back then in 1985 -- collided.

The accidents continued and each new exposure brought me to new insights into what it would mean to communicate communicatively. In the process, it is fair
to say that I traversed most of the divides of the communication field -- quantitative and qualitative, objectivist and interpretive, administrative and critical, universal and contextual. I also visited with some depth of exposure virtually all the fields from which our founders emigrated -- sociology, psychology, anthropology, cybernetics, journalism, language studies, film studies, rhetoric, and so on. Along the way, I made some good friends via their writings -- Bateson, Beltran, Bourdieu, Bronowski, Bruner, Douglas, Foucault, Freire, Gadamer, Galtung, Goffman, Giddens, Habermas, Hayles, O’Neill, Rorty. It is possible to trace the impacts of every one of them in my development of Sense-Making. They now travel with me everywhere I go. They are a diverse lot. We’d probably have trouble getting them to be civil to one another at a meeting. Now, 35 years later, I still see myself as standing in-between.

My Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003), for example, posits that to understand users we must see them as changing as they move through time-space, sometimes struggling to align themselves with community and system and sometimes struggling to separate themselves. It posits that struggles with self identity and collective identity are inherent struggles in the human conditions and potentially pertinent to every moment of intersection between a person (as audience member, as user) and a system. It posits that we must ask informants how they see these struggles in their own terms and that this is in fact a more efficient way to understand another’s views or needs than to require that they map themselves onto our imposed expert maps. It posits that we can build, using the new technologies, interfaces for bridging the gaps between artificial expert worlds and the material/interpretive worlds of the everyday.

Of course, because of my obsession with reinventing communication for practice, I have extended the inventions I have designed to a variety of practical contexts. A few examples include journalistic design, the library reference interview, the conduct of a graduate seminar, the structure of an academic dialogue, and the review of a plethora of academic theories about media effects (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003; Dervin, Foreman-Wernet, Jansen, Schaefer & Shields, 2001; Dervin, Shields & Song, 2005). On a larger scale, I have extended the same dialogic principles into the design of the 1985 “paradigm dialogues” meeting of the International Communication Association (Dervin, Grossberg, O’Keefe & Wartella, 1989a,b) and to design of the 2004 plenary (Dervin & Song, 2004) which served as the impetus for this special issue of *Keio Communication Review*.

I continue to define myself as “in-between” because focusing as I have on communicatings as the “verbings” by which people make and unmake their movements through time-space, I at one and the same time include, for example, both the interests of sociology and those of psychology in my purview. Naturally, in assessments of my work, those who ascribe to sociological positions see me as too psychological, and those who ascribe to psychological positions see me as too
sociological. I feel I am in good company in this regard because Anthony Giddens, long considered the doyen of British sociologists, has been object of the same criticism (Best & Kellner, 1991).

Yet, it is important that I conclude by returning to the humility with which I feel I must now address my goal to re-invent communication communicatively. On the surface it may appear as if I want everyone to be out here in the moat, in the in-between with me. It may appear as if I define this moat as where open-minded and true communicative goals exist. But what I have come to understand about communicating is that those who reside with seeming safety inside castles are using communication in their struggles to stay inside, to stay in line; while those of us seeming to be risking danger in the moats are doing the same thing -- using communication in our struggles to stay outside, to fall out of line. We all travel in between.
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