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Research in dialogic theory and public relations

In 2002, Kent & Taylor explicated the concept of dialogic communication in public relations. The concept of dialogue is deeply rooted in philosophy and relational communication theory. This essay extends the earlier work by Kent & Taylor and traces the roots of dialogue, identifies over-arching tenets, and situates dialogue within a framework of ethical public relations. The essay also provides an updated review on the research and theoretical development of dialogic theory in public relations.

The field of public relations has seen a growth in theory development during the last decade. For many years, Grunig's *Excellence Theory* (1989, 1992) provided one of the few theoretical frameworks for understanding and evaluating ethical public relations. However, as the field matured, other theoretical frameworks emerged that are providing valuable ways to understand effective and ethical public relations. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an updated overview of the development of dialogic theory in public relations. The first part of the chapter reviews the foundations of dialogue. The second section applies dialogic theory to public relations and the final section outlines how organizations can fulfill the dialogic promise in building relationship with publics.

Philosophical foundations of dialogue

The concept of dialogue has its roots in a variety of disciplines: philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, and relational communication. It was in the Socratic Dialogues of Plato that the concept of dialogue first emerged as a framework for thinking about communication relationships. Indeed, philosophers and rhetoricians for thousands

of years have considered dialogue as both one of the most ethical forms of communication and as one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood.

German Theologian Martin Buber (1970) is considered by most to be the father of the modern concept of dialogue. Buber suggested that dialogue involves an effort to recognize the value of the other—to see him/her as an end and not merely as a means to achieve a desired goal. He suggested that individuals should view others *not as objects*—the “I You,” but as *equals* the “I Thou” (Buber, 1970: 53 ff). Buber’s work is based on reciprocity, mutuality, involvement, and openness.

Dialogue has become an area of great importance to public relations. Some of the earliest discussions have been attributed to Pearson (1989a, 1989b). According to Pearson, “public relations is best conceptualized as the management of interpersonal dialectic” (1989a: 177). Pearson suggested that what is important to the practice of ethical public relations is to have a dialogic *system* rather than monologic *policies*. As Pearson (1989a: 206) explained:

“If what is wrong with organization conduct cannot be intuited or arrived at by some monological process, as much postmodern rhetorical theory and postmodern philosophy in general argues, then the focus for an organizational ethicist must shift dramatically. The important question becomes, not what action or policy is more right than another (a question that is usually posed as a monologue), but what kind of communication system maximizes the chances competing interests can discover some shared ground and be transformed or transcended. This question shifts the emphasis from an areas [sic] in which practitioners do not have special expertise—ethical theory—to areas in which they do have expertise—communication theory and practice.”

Almost a decade after Pearson’s first articles on dialogue appeared, Botan (1997: 4) suggested that “dialogue manifests itself more as a stance, orientation, or bearing in communication rather than as a specific method, technique, or format.” Kent & Taylor (1998: 323) addressed dialogic relationship building on the Internet and argued

that “dialogue is product rather than process.” By this the authors argued that dialogue was different from symmetrical communication. Their point of differentiation was that the symmetrical model was a procedural way to build relationships—actually, to listen, or solicit feedback—but that it did not involve actually responding to stakeholders as equals. The focus was on *feedback* not *relationships*.

Although a dialogic approach to public relations is not a process that can be easily operationalized, or reduced to a series of steps, dialogue does consist of several coherent assumptions. An extensive literature review of the concept of dialogue in communication, public relations, philosophy, and psychology reveals five overarching tenets of dialogue. These tenets are the first step toward articulating a public relations theory of dialogue.

Tenets of dialogic public relations theory

Before discussing the features of dialogue in detail, it is important to note that dialogue is not a panacea. As will be clear from the discussion that follows, dialogue *can* be put to both moral and immoral ends. Gunson & Collins (1997), for example, point out, that just because dialogic partners create *dialogic* communication structures, does not mean that they are behaving dialogically. If one partner subverts the dialogic process through manipulation, disconfirmation, or exclusion, then the end result will not be dialogic.

Dialogue as an orientation includes five features: (a) *mutuality*, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; (b) *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; (c) *empathy*, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; (d) *risk*, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, (e) *commitment*, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics.

Mutuality: Mutuality refers to an acknowledgement that organizations and publics are inextricably tied together. Mutuality is characterized by an “inclusion or collaborative orientation” and a “spirit of mutual equality.” Today, with globalization, what happens in one nation may affect organization–public relations in other nations. Thus, organizations must extend beyond the usual communication perspectives that they take when they plan, conduct and evaluate the effectiveness of their communication efforts.

(a) *Collaboration:* Unlike bargaining and negotiation, dialogue is not about winning, losing, or compromising. All individuals engaged in a dialogue should have positions of their own, and should advocate those positions vigorously. However, dialogue is premised on intersubjectivity, or an attempt not simply to understand the positions of others but to empathize with them (Anderson, 1994; Friedman, 1994; Gadamer, 1994; Johannesen, 1990; Pearson, 1989a). As Gadamer (1994: 116) explains:

“A conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says.”

(b) *Spirit of mutual equality:* Participants in dialogue are viewed as persons and not as objects. This is not a new idea. Emmanuel Kant spoke of mutual equality in the *Categorical Imperative*. In dialogue, the exercise of power or superiority should be avoided. Participants should feel comfortable discussing any topic free of expressions of ridicule or contempt. Although the partners in exchanges are often of differing status, discussants should consciously avoid the dynamics and trappings of power to manipulate or otherwise control the flow or direction of conversation (Cherwitz, 1977; Derber, 1994; Freire, 1970; Johannesen, 1990; Makay & Brown, 1972; Pearson, 1989a).

From a public relations standpoint, mutuality is already an accepted practice. The idea of information subsidy (Gandy, 1982) is based on recognition of mutuality between the media and public relations. Mutuality is also the reasoning behind collaboration.

Propinquity: At the most basic level, propinquity advocates for a type of rhetorical exchange. It is an orientation to a relationship. For organizations, dialogic propinquity means that publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations. Propinquity is created by three features of dialogic relationships:

(a) *Immediacy of presence:* The feature of immediacy of presence suggests that parties involved are communicating in the *present* about issues, rather than *after* decisions have been made. Immediacy of presence also suggests that parties are communicating in a shared space (or place) (cf., Anderson, 1994; Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Buber, 1970; Friedman, 1994; Kaplan, 1994; Rogers, 1994). According to Buber, “Presence is not what is evanescent and passes but what confronts us, waiting and enduring. . . . What is essential is lived in the present” (1970: 64).

(b) *Temporal flow:* Dialogic communication is relational. It involves an orientation of the past and the present, and an eye toward future relationships. Dialogue is not rooted only in the present; rather, its focus is on a continued and shared future for all participants. Dialogue is deliberative and seeks to construct a future for participants that is both equitable and acceptable to all involved (cf., Anderson, 1994; Johannesen, 1990).

(c) *Engagement:* Dialogic participants must be willing to give their whole selves to encounters. Dialogue is not something that can take place in one’s spare time or in the periphery as an issues manager might vigilantly track “potential” problems. Dialogic participants are accessible. All parties should respect their discussant(s) and risk attachment and fondness rather than maintaining positions of neutrality or distance (cf., Anderson, 1994; Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Buber, 1970; Johannesen, 1990). When an organization is fully engaged in its community (local or global) it will have a broader context and wider perspectives to draw upon in its decision-making.

Empathy: Empathy, also called *sympathy* in the literature, refers to the atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed. Empathetic communication is important because practitioners can improve their communication by “walking in the

shoes” of their publics. This feature of dialogue is characterized by:

- (a) *Supportiveness*: Dialogue involves creating a climate in which others are not only encouraged to participate but their participation is facilitated. That is, meetings are open to all interested participants, conversations are held in easily accessible locations, materials are made available to all, and efforts are made to facilitate mutual understanding. Participants demonstrate the “capacity to listen without anticipating, interfering, competing, refuting, or warping meanings into preconceived interpretations” (Johannesen, 1990: 63–64; cf., also, Arnett, 1994; Buber, 1970; Derber, 1994; Kaplan, 1994). Ethical public relations, based on dialogue, requires no special knowledge of ethical theory; rather, ethical public relations is based on sound communication systems. Pearson (1989a: 380) explains:

“Ethics in public relations is not fundamentally a question of whether it is right or wrong to tell the truth, steal clients from one another, accept free lunches or bribes or provide information for insider trading etc. Rather, ethical public relations practice is more fundamentally a question of implementing and maintaining inter-organizational communication systems which question, discuss and validate these and other substantive ethical claims.”

- (b) *Communal orientation*: Dialogue presupposes a communal orientation between interactants, whether they are individuals, organizations or publics. There is an understanding of the inter connectiveness of groups and they work together to create the community.
- (c) *Confirmation*: The practice of confirmation refers to acknowledging the voice of the other in spite of one’s ability to ignore it. Confirmation is a necessary precondition of dialogue if discussants are to build trust with others (Freire, 1970; Friedman, 1994; Johannesen, 1990; Kaplan, 1994; Laing, 1969). As Laing (1969: 82) explains, confirmation varies in degree from a smile or a handshake to an evocative action. Organizations need to acknowledge that individuals and groups who do not agree with the organization still need to be heard.

Risk: As Leitch & Neilson (2001: 135) have noted, “genuine dialogue is a problematic concept for system[s] public relations because it has the potential to produce unpredictable and dangerous outcomes.” Although parties who engage in dialogue take relational risks, dialogic participants also risk great rewards. Implicit in all relationships—interpersonal, organizational and public—is risk. The assumption of risk is characterized by three features in dialogic exchanges:

- (a) *Vulnerability:* As critical theory suggests, information is power. Dialogue, by necessity, involves the sharing of information, individual beliefs, and desires, with others. Because dialogue involves risk, it also, necessarily, makes participants vulnerable to manipulation or ridicule by others. Vulnerability in dialogue, however, should not be viewed pejoratively. It is through self-disclosure and risk that relationships are built and the possibility for change on the part of participants exists. Dialogic participants have to be willing to emerge from exchanges as new, changed, and reborn.
- (b) *Unanticipated consequences:* Dialogic communication is unrehearsed and spontaneous. Dialogic exchanges are not scripted nor are they predictable. Spontaneity emerges in the interaction of participants and their individual beliefs, values and attitudes. Indeed, the presence of an interpersonal relationship (although not necessarily face-to-face) between participants is what facilitates dialogue (cf., Anderson, 1994; Cherwitz, 1977; Friedman, 1994; Makay & Brown, 1972).
- (c) *Recognition of strange otherness.* This feature is the unconditional acceptance of the uniqueness and individuality of one’s interlocutor. Recognition of strange otherness is not limited to the interaction of strangers or acquaintances but also includes exchanges with those who are well known. Recognition of strange otherness also includes a consciousness of the fact that the *other* is not the same as oneself—nor should they be. Individuals are accepted as unique and valuable in their own right and *because* of the differences that they bring to dialogic exchanges (cf., Anderson, 1994; Buber, 1970; Friedman, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Stewart, 1978).

From a public relations standpoint, intentional, or relational, risk is a difficult concept to accept. Indeed, public relations is largely about reducing environmental risks in order to maximize stability,

predictability, and profits. And yet, *dialogic risk* offers the reward of stronger organization–public relationships, or at least more predictable relationships with publics. Thus, dialogic risk makes organizational sense; it can create understanding and minimize uncertainty and misunderstandings.

Commitment: The final principle of dialogue, commitment describes three characteristics of dialogic encounters:

- (a) *Genuineness and authenticity:* Dialogue is honest and forthright. It involves revealing one's position—"shooting from the hip" in spite of the possible value of deception. This is not to say that interlocutors are indiscreet, but rather that they endeavor to place the good of the relationship above the good of the self (or the client/organization) (Anderson, 1994; Buber, 1970; Cherwitz, 1977; Friedman, 1994; Johannesen, 1990; Makay & Brown, 1972; Rogers, 1994).
- (b) *Commitment to conversation:* Interlocutors, like Plato's Socrates, are committed to the conversation, but not in an adversarial or forensic manner where one side necessarily has to win. Conversations are held for the purposes of mutual benefit and understanding. Like Socrates, discussants participate in dialogue for the mutual benefit of all parties involved and not to defeat the other or to "exploit their weaknesses" (Ellul, 1985; Gadamer, 1994; Makay & Brown, 1972; Pearson, 1989a).
- (c) *Commitment to interpretation.* Since dialogue is intersubjective, it necessitates interpretation and understanding by all parties involved. Dialogue necessitates that all participants are willing to exert themselves on the part of others in a dialogue to understand often-diverse positions. Commitment to interpretation also means that efforts are made to grasp the positions, beliefs, and values of others before their positions can be equitably evaluated (Gadamer, 1994; Ellul, 1985; Makay & Brown, 1972).

Genuine dialogue, involves more than just a commitment to a relationship. Dialogue occurs when individuals (and sometimes groups) agree to set aside their differences long enough to come to an understanding of the others' positions. Dialogue is not equivalent to agreement. Rather, dialogue is more akin to

intersubjectivity where both parties attempt to understand and appreciate the values and interests of the other. Dialogue is both Socratic and Kantian. Dialogue rests on an acknowledgement of the worth of the other as well as a willingness to “continue the conversation”—not for purposes of swaying the other with the strength of one’s erudition, but as a means of understanding the other and reaching mutually satisfying positions.

The five tenets outlined above provide a solid philosophical basis for dialogic theory. The next section of this chapter reviews how dialogic theory has been applied in public relations research.

Applications of dialogic theory in public relations research

Dozens of studies have incorporated dialogue as a theoretical framework for public relations research. Dialogue has been most often studied in relationship management literature and in mediated communication research. Each will be discussed below:

Dialogue in relationship building: The dialogic theory of public relations has extended research exploring rhetoric and reputation management (Heath, 2001, 2006; Surma, 2006), manager competencies in the context of organizational change (Frahm & Brown, 2003, 2006), how city-resident relationships affect resident evaluations of municipalities (Bruning, Langenhop, & Green, 2004), how zoo managers are employing relationship-building communication, evaluation, and feedback strategies to retain membership (Kinser & Fall, 2006), and the role that trust plays in the development and maintenance of relationships between public relations practitioners and their clients (Chia, 2005).

Deuze (2007) offers dialogic theory as a means for media professionals to adapt to the new global environment, and in an examination linking diversity and public relations in higher education. Brunner (2005) argues that dialogue scales should be added to the relationship scales. L’Etang & Pieczka (2006) advance the dialogic theory of public relations for consideration in contemporary public relations practice, education, and research. In

the nonprofit sector, Dutta-Bergman (2004) recommends using a dialogic strategic approach to developing a descriptive profile of volunteerism.

Many of the articles mentioned above link dialogic theory with relationship management theory. Both dialogue and relationship management argue for a *public centered* approach to public relations and reflect what Botan & Taylor (2004) termed a co-orientation approach that treats publics as valuable partners in the public relations process. One way that organizations can engage in dialogic relationship building is through their web sites.

Dialogue in mediated communication: Today, many people visit organizational web sites for information. Web sites are emerging as key public relations tools for both profit seeking and non-profit organizations. Using the dialogic theory of public relations as the theoretical framework, Kent & Taylor (1998, 2002) provided a strategic framework to facilitate relationship building with publics through the World Wide Web. Viewed as more than a relational strategy for interpersonal communication, Kent & Taylor (1998, 2002) offered five web site design features to serve as guidelines for the successful integration of dialogic public relations via the World Wide Web.

The first web site design feature, *usefulness of information*, suggests that organizations provide useful information of general value to all publics in a logical hierarchical structure. The second web site design feature, *ease of interface*, involves the intuitiveness and/or ease of the interface. Developed out of respect for the valued visitors, the third web site design feature, *rule of conservation*, maintains that organizational web sites should include only essential links to other related sites. The fourth web site design feature, *generation of return visits*, explores ways to create the foundation for long lasting relationships through the generation of return visits. The fifth feature, *dialogic (feedback) loop*, allows publics to query organizations and offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions (Kent & Taylor, 1998: 327). Recommendations include offering online question and answer sessions, having available online *experts* to

answer questions for interested visitors, and offering up-to-date information on changing issues through special forums and commentaries.

Taylor, Kent, & White (2001) maintained that the five dialogic principles can be related to interpersonal relationship theories: (1) relationships are based on interest or attraction; (2) relationships are based on interaction; (3) relationships are based on trust yet involve some risk; (4) relationships require periodic maintenance; and (5) relationships involve cycles of rewarding and unsatisfactory interaction.

Taylor *et al.* contended that dialogue—as both an interpersonal and public relations activity—facilitate each of these relational development components. According to Kent & Taylor (1998: 330), “sites should be dynamic enough to encourage all potential publics to explore them, information rich enough to meet the needs of very diverse publics, and interactive enough to allow users to pursue further informational issues and dialogic relationships.”

Other studies expanded Kent & Taylor’s dialogic Internet principles to scholarship examining the relationship-building potential of the Internet (Kang & Norton, 2006; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Reber & Kim, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Taylor & Kent, 2004). Kent & Taylor’s (1998, 2002) dialogic principles were also extended in crisis management response tactics (Perry, Taylor & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005). User perceptions of the importance of the dialogic features were explored via usability tests and survey research (McAllister-Spooner, 2008). Esrock & Leichty (1999, 2000) studied how corporations are using the web to build relationships and promote their organizations.

A shift in the paradigm: How organizations can fulfill the dialogic promise

It appears that dialogic public relations theory is helping to enlarge and complement the public relations paradigm. The paradigm shift started when Pearson (1989a, 1989b) argued that the practice of

ethical public relations encompasses a dialogic system rather than monologic policies. Kent & Taylor (1998, 2002) then extended Pearson's dialogic theory of public relations to enrich relationship-building research.

Today, the theoretical framework of relationship management (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000) encompasses and extends the theory of dialogue. Dialogue as a theoretical framework may help to overcome some of the limitations associated with the symmetrical paradigm. Lane (2004: 11), for example, points out that in the real world, inequalities in power and resources between organizations and publics are unlikely to be forfeited to gain something as nebulous and intangible as goodwill:

“Even if public relations professionals choose to accept the normative status of symmetric dialogue, there remains the vexed question of practicalities: How do you find out what your publics want? How do you ensure that those publics are open to change and accommodating of organizational desires? And what do you do if your publics are not homogenous in their needs? Quite simply, critics feel that the two-way symmetric model is naïve, overly-idealistic and has no place in the real world of public relations.”

As Heath, Pearce, Shotter, Taylor, Kersten, Zorn, Roper, Motion & Deetz (2006) argue, dialogue will create benefits for both organizations and publics. Dialogue requires that successful, ethical processes come from *within* the organization. This means that organizational leaders need to be aware of the benefits of a dialogic orientation. For publics, dialogue can mean increased organizational accountability, a greater say in organizational operations, and increased public satisfaction (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Yet, the dialogic promise has not yet been realized. So the question remains, what does an organization need to do in order to fulfill the dialogic promise in its relationships with publics? The answer is still evolving. We know from the research mentioned above that organizations should find common ground with the community and

develop programs that engage the community. We know that dialogue is an orientation and a commitment to engage. And, we know that we can design Web sites in such a way as to facilitate relationship building. Now, it is time for organizations to dedicate the resources needed to enact such an orientation. Organizations cannot use short-term frameworks for measuring the value of dialogue.

“Although the use of a dialogic approach can be more time consuming than traditional approaches to public relations practice, the benefits far outweigh the costs . . . building relationships through this type of approach can strengthen external relations and create situations where both organizational and community interests are advanced” (Bruning et al., 2004: 129)

In conclusion, moving forward into the next decade, the researchers believe that the development of dialogic public relations theory and practice will continue to grow. Dialogue will be refined by research, extended by further theorizing, and validated when organizations see how the value of incorporating a dialogic orientation into their relationships with publics. When these three scenarios align, the promise of dialogic public relations will be fulfilled. The paradigm that has been guiding public relations for theory and research will be complemented by a new framework and all parties involved—publics, organizations, researchers and practitioners—will benefit. We believe that dialogic public relations is an ethical approach to understanding and extending organization-public relationships.

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