

## President's speech from the 2004 convention

# Diversity Redux

I strongly believe that the communication discipline has a moral and professional obligation to understand, respect, and adapt to the rich diversity of backgrounds and intellectual perspectives in and beyond our classrooms, our discipline, and our campuses. I see three primary avenues that lead to this goal:



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1. We should dedicate ourselves to becoming intercultural communication scholars and champions of cultural diversity studies.
2. We need to understand and respect the intellectual diversity within our discipline.
3. We should support the diversification of NCA in order to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

Before I embark on these three pathways, I want to pre-deconstruct my address. My academic background and perspective is rhetorical. I feel safest and most confident in the arms of Aristotle. Being a former debate coach, I revel in logical arguments and their structure. But, today—in the interest of diversity—I shall try to break out of that mold. I have put my trust in self-disclosure, narratives, metaphors, and emotional proof.

### Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Communication

In her presidential address at the 1997 NCA Convention, **Judith Trent** observed: "Over the years, a number of my predecessors have focused their presidential addresses on equality, diversity, and multiculturalism, and now I extend their challenge." President Trent continued: "We should not be seduced into believing that 33 years of

civil rights legislation and 30 years of affirmative action have solved the problems." What are the problems Judith and I worry about? Their names are stereotyping, ethnocentrism, prejudice, discrimination, and bigotry.

Why do so many NCA presidents speak about diversity in their presidential addresses? Perhaps it's because we see NCA as a whole. We hear from and work with members of all stripes. We learn that in order to serve our discipline, we must

understand, respect, and address the needs of all members.

When I was seeking election as NCA President and attending all of the regional conventions, my husband rode an elevator with two gentlemen. One man made the following observation to the other in an apprehensive voice: "Just imagine. If Engleberg's elected, that will mean two women in a row!"

Well, I have news for you guys, we did one better. We now have three women Presidents in a row. Since 1914, NCA has had 90 presidents; however, less than 15 percent have been women. Only one African American—**Orlando Taylor**—has served in this post. Yet, I sincerely believe that every NCA officer shares a personal and professional commitment to enhancing our understanding and respect for diversity.

In 2002, I was invited and honored to present the keynote address at the Speech Communication Association of Puerto Rico's annual convention. The title of my address was "Alien in the Classroom."

As I prepared my remarks, three of my campus colleagues—one Panamanian, one Spanish, and one Cuban—told me that there are three different words and meanings for alien in Spanish. One of

the most common definitions of alien is that of foreigner—*extranjero*. Alien also means an outsider or stranger—someone from a very different place or society—*extrano*. And certainly, an alien can be an extraterrestrial—someone or something from outer space—*criatura de otro planeta*.

So who is the alien in the classroom today? In my classroom, one alien stands out. That person is seen as a foreigner by some students. That person is certainly someone who belongs to a different culture. And, at times, I am sure that the alien in question seems to be coming from another planet. That alien, if you haven't guessed, is me. I also think that many of you would be even more of an alien in my classroom. To clarify this comment, I need to tell you a little bit about the place where I have worked for most of my career: Prince George's Community College.

When I began teaching there in the early 1970s, 93 percent of our students were white. The majority were young men. Today, we enroll more than 35,000 students. We share a border with Washington, DC and are located in the wealthiest African American county in the United States. White students now represent less than 10 percent of our student body. The majority of students are African American women. The average age is 30-something.

Thus, at Prince George's Community College, I am the alien in the classroom. Each semester, about three-fourths of my students are African American. International students constitute the next largest group. I rarely have more than two white students in any class.

I recognize the fact that my classroom may be very different than yours. And that is exactly why I believe all of us have an obligation to understand, respect, and adapt to the rich diversity of

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# There's an alien in the classroom

## President's Address

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backgrounds and perspective in both our institutions and the world in which our students live. So how do you do that? At the end of every semester, I ask my classes to generate a list of qualities that characterize a good instructor—one who understands and is sensitive to their diverse needs. Three qualities usually top the list.

My students tell me that:

- ◆ Professors should know more about their cultures and native countries.
- ◆ Professors should treat them as unique individuals, not as stereotypes.
- ◆ Professors should accommodate their different cultural perspectives and, in some cases, their struggle with Standard American English.

Remember in grade school, when you did a project on another country? You were expected to report everything you could learn about it. I guess I'm asking us to do a more sophisticated version of this assignment.

Read about the history, politics, religions, and communication dimensions of other cultures. Read outstanding novels by people of color and authors from other countries. Several years ago I began looking for books that would help me learn more about my Muslim students. I knew very little about the life and work of Muhammad. I had other questions: Why is the Koran distinguished as a book of exquisite poetry? What are the five pillars of Islam? What are the differences between Shiites and Sunnis?

Even five years ago, it was difficult to find a basic book about Islam in commercial bookstores, let alone some college libraries. But I persevered. I had no idea that my quest would better prepare me for the classroom on September 13, 2001.

Two days after the September 11th attack, I met with my interpersonal communication class. One of my students was a Pakistani Muslim. Before class, I asked her if she would be willing to answer class questions about her religion. She agreed. At the beginning of class, I explained that we would spend the hour talking about Islam with help from a student. I would be available to answer questions about my religion, Judaism.

The questions were amazing. *Will you go to heaven if you kill a Christian or Jew? Why aren't you hiding your face and body like other Muslim women? Aren't Islam and Judaism just other forms of Christianity—like Presbyterian and Baptist? Why don't Muslims and Jews eat pork, worship on Sunday, believe in Jesus, and permit men and women to worship together?* Interestingly, after answering their questions, the students decided that Islam and Judaism were very much alike. So they asked—why do you hate each other? “Do you hate me?” I asked my student. “Of course not,” she said, “I love you.” Talk about an extraordinary, teachable moment! Particularly given the fact that religious discrimination complaints to the EEOC have increased 84 percent since 1992.

We also should understand and appreciate more about the communication dynamics in other cultures. Here, I take critical thinking as my point of departure. Critical thinking has become a well meaning but hegemonic holy grail in academia. Employers demand graduates who can think critically. Debate coaches—I among them—proudly boast that we are the only ones who really know how to teach critical thinking.

But, what about the role of emotions in decision making? Is emotional intelligence just a fad or a theory worthy of our attention and research? What about **Stephen Toulmins** eloquent argument in his 2001 book, *Return to*

*Reason*, that the Western dominance of rationality—our quest for absolute certainties—has diminished the value of reasonableness, a system of humane judgments based on personal experience and practice. How do we account for deontic logic that adheres to moral imperatives as premises, particularly given the prominent role of “moral values” in the presidential election?

Two years ago, I taught an honors debate course. The first assignment was to develop and deliver a prima facie affirmative speech on the class-chosen debate proposition that the United States should significantly restrict and control immigration.

An African American student presented a speech in which she told a lengthy story about a high-paid immigrant athlete who, in her opinion, was taking a job away from an American athlete. After the speech, I explained that in a debate, she would be vulnerable to “attack” because she had only given her opinion and shared only one example. She looked at me as though I were a *criatura de otro planeta*. Her mother and her mother's friends had listened to her speech. They thought it was very persuasive. What right did I have to question her conclusion?

A few days later, another student came to me in tears. She was preparing for her debate and told me, “I can't think that way.” She didn't understand why personal opinions and emotional stories didn't count, why she had to “clash” with and “attack” the other side.

My students made me rethink how I teach this course. I had to face the fact that the “old” way of teaching debate was not working and, in fact, may have become counterproductive.

I now explain that traditional debate requires a type of thinking that may be alien to them. I explain that learning this way of thinking has merit, particularly  
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# Diversity: Intellectual as well as cultural

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for those intending to enter professions such as law, science, or higher education in which rigorous critical thinking is the coin of the realm. And I incorporate other ways of arguing into the courses, such as Makau and Marty's cooperative argumentation model and Foss and Foss's notion of invitational rhetoric. I also encourage students to analyze the real-world debates that occur in their communities.

Finally, I urge you to read the ever-improving and excellent list of intercultural communication textbooks in our discipline as well as scholarly texts that take a more detailed look at specific aspects of intercultural communication dealing with topics such as whiteness, cultural and gender identity, interracial communication, and non-western perspectives on human communication.

How can we teach or research group communication, language, conflict resolution, persuasion, nonverbal communication, leadership, or organizational communication if we don't understand the ways in which cultural variables co-construct meaning?

How can we make strong claims in our journals when the research limitations sections of many articles confess the exclusion of cultural perspectives? Although we have come a long way in understanding, respecting, and adapting to cultural diversity, we have a long road ahead of us if we intend to do justice to the study of human communication.

## Intellectual Diversity

Not only do we have a professional obligation to understand cultural diversity, we also should recognize the value of intellectual diversity within our discipline.

NCA officers frequently hear grumblings from members that our convention is too big, too complex, too focused on one

area (take your pick—rhetoric, social science, ethnic studies, teaching). In short, it's too intellectually diverse.

As an eternal optimist, I see intellectual diversity as NCA's greatest strength. The National Communication Association personifies the complexities of communication studies while sustaining a core that holds. Rather than seeing NCA's glass as half full of what you or I want in it, I see the NCA glass as a cup that runneth over with valuable scholarship for everyone.

Unfortunately, as is the case in many academic associations, we often segregate ourselves based on our scholarly interests. For example, how many of you—who are not already members of these groups—attend convention programs sponsored by our caucuses or by divisions whose research is culturally based? And, conversely, how many of you associated with these units devote significant convention time to traditional and emerging areas of communication scholarship?

How many of us—who don't write for or teach basic communication courses—attend programs sponsored by the Basic Course Division to see what's going on in the one course that shapes most students' understanding of communication studies?

How many of our members can cogently describe what we now study in areas such as performance studies, social cognition, critical and cultural studies, semiotics, spiritual communication, and ethnography? De facto segregation is alive and well.

But...you may be saying, *I'm not interested in those topics*. Exactly! That is my point. As a bone fide discipline in which multiple perspectives intersect and influence one another, we should welcome and seek intellectual diversity.

Let me use our community college section—the one I know best—as an

example of how difficult it can be to earn acceptance, let alone respect, in NCA. The founders of this section met enormous opposition when we struggled to become an NCA unit in 1974. When we asked the Legislative Council to include *The Communication Teacher* as a membership subscription option, we were denied. Fortunately, that decision has been reversed.

Two weeks ago, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* noted that community colleges now enroll 6 million students—more than half of all undergraduates. The Chronicle also observed that although two-year colleges play a central role in both job training and access to higher education, their public image continues to suffer.

Sadly, some graduate programs actively discourage their students from seeking a professional career in a two-year college. Even worse, some discount applications from community college faculty. Moreover, our students are rarely subject populations in communication research. Fortunately, there are now exceptions to these oversights—graduate schools that actively recruit and welcome us, as well as researchers who seek collaboration.

One of the most discouraging moments of my academic career came when I was turned down for an SCA post because, I was told, a community college person could not handle the job. If we still carry a chip on our shoulders, it's a chip well earned. I suspect that there are other sections and divisions whose members bear similar scars and equally enduring chips.

History and old scars aside, I now know that NCA and its partners do more to bring us together than separate us. NCA's publishing partnerships with Taylor & Francis and EBSCO have created a larger market for our scholarship and opportunities to publish nontraditional materials. I love the comprehensive Handbooks published by our good friends at Erlbaum and at Sage.

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# Diversity, “Hope” and optimism strengthen NCA

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I have a special place in my heart for the NCA-sponsored Hope Institute for Faculty Development, now at Luther College. Where else can communication faculty members spend an idyllic week interacting with and learning from our discipline’s most distinguished scholars? As I like to say, if you want a good dose of intellectual diversity, there’s always Hope.

## Association Diversification

Finally, I want to spend a couple of minutes on NCA diversification. Since our move to Washington, DC, NCA has begun to diversify in several ways guided by our new Strategic Plan. Let me read our mission statement and then suggest you memorize five of the words in it:

*The National Communication Association promotes effective and ethical communication. The Association supports the communication research, scholarship, public service, and practice of a diverse community of scholars, educators, administrators, students, practitioners, and publics.*

The five words you should memorize are these: *promotes effective and ethical communication*. When people ask me, *What does NCA do?*, I say, “We promote effective and ethical communication.” The response is almost always the same: *Well it’s about time some group does that!*

I have neither the time—nor you the endurance—to sit through a reading of our five strategic initiatives and how we’re moving ahead on all of them. Let me mention a few highlights:

1. We are developing and soon will implement a communications plan to promote communication scholarship and member achievements to a wider academic and external audience.
2. We have produced several new publications advocating the inclusion

of communication in the general education curriculum and supporting communication studies in higher education.

3. We have become active in congressional briefings on Capitol Hill and become more involved with academic organizations such as the Consortium of Social Science Associations, the National Humanities Alliance, and the American Council of Learned Societies, to name a few.
4. The Executive Committee and Legislative Assembly are developing Certification Standards for Undergraduate Communication Programs.
5. NCA will soon have a new Web site with a sophisticated search engine.
6. The Research Board has developed a grants database to help members seeking financial support for their projects. In this area, however, we need to do much more. We also need a comprehensive plan for securing external funding for NCA.

I am very optimistic that our Strategic Plan will move us to a level of excellence only dreamed of ten years ago. My optimism is buoyed by the initiative and leadership of our new Executive Director, **Roger Smitter**.

When introducing Roger, I often borrow a description of leadership from **Jim Collins’** book, *Good to Great*. Roger Smitter meets every characteristic of someone with the capacity to lead us from being a good organization to a great one. Self-effacing, quiet, and reserved, Roger is a paradoxical blend of personal humility and unrelenting professional will. His ambition is first and foremost for the association and our discipline, not for himself.

## Conclusion

When I look and listen to my students, I understand that I am more than an alien in the classroom. They tell me I am an OWL—an old white lady. Fortunately, owls are known for their wisdom. I hope that I have become a wiser

educator and a better scholar by understanding, respecting, and adapting to cultural diversity. Owls are also known for their keen eyesight. I hope I have learned to see my students as bearers of cultural gifts rather than as aliens.

When we describe the characteristics of other cultures in our classrooms and publications, we also have an obligation to appreciate those cultures—and our students—in meaningful ways. When we extol the importance of communication ethics and tolerance, we also must understand, respect, or adapt to the different perspectives and affiliations within our own discipline. And while you have a perfect right to voice complaints about any of our professional associations, you should also be prepared to help us address those grievance and advance organizational goals.

My experience as an NCA officer has been the gift of a lifetime. As is the case of a good marriage or partnership, my love for the National Communication Association has matured and intensified. If everyone could experience NCA as I have, we would need a much bigger site to host our national convention.

Last year I watched **Bill Moyers** interview **Julie Taymor**, the talented director and designer of, among other triumphs, the Broadway musical version of *The Lion King*. Moyers asked Taymor why art is so important to people all over the world. Taymor replied that art is a transforming experience that works at all levels of consciousness and culture. I believe the same is true of communication studies. Effective and ethical communication has the power to transform all of us. And like art, communication works at all levels of consciousness and culture. When we understand, respect, and adapt to the rich diversity of our students, our colleagues, and our discipline, we will elevate the study of human communication to a universal art form.