COMMUNICATION IN THE CONVERSATION OF DISCIPLINES

ROBERT T. CRAIG

Communication has acquired many of the institutional-professional trappings of an academic discipline, but as an intellectual tradition it remains radically heterogeneous and largely derivative. What mainly explains the field's disciplinary emergence is its significant relationship to communication as a category of social practice, and it is, I argue, by reconstructing its intellectual traditions around that category that the field can best hope not only to become more intellectually coherent and productive but more useful to society as well. A theory of disciplinarity is presented in which every discipline derives its identity and coherence from its participation in the conversation of disciplines, for which it draws on a specific mixture of intellectual, institutional, and sociocultural discursive resources. Communication's specific character as a discipline thus can be understood in terms of its contributions to knowledge in certain intellectual traditions, its evolving institutional forms, and its relevance to "communication" understood as a socioculturally constituted category of problems and practices. The third of these factors — the sociocultural context of disciplinarity — has, I maintain, a primary role. Communication as a practical discipline has been constructed upon (even as it reflexively reconstructs) the foundation of communication as an increasingly central category in modern societies and global culture.

Keywords: disciplines, practical discipline, problematization, social practices

There is, of course, nothing ultimately sacred or immutable about the existing departments of academic study, which have assumed their present, seemingly rather haphazard forms

over a relatively brief span of history. Historical and comparative perspectives are required in order to avoid falsely naturalizing the present categories of knowledge and systems of academic organization. Most of what we now think of as "traditional" disciplines are scarcely more than a century old as organized professions, and it is recurrently fashionable to predict their imminent demise or transformation within some radically different (interdisciplinary, or postdisciplinary) institutional arrangement. Academic disciplines are sometimes derided as mere appurtenances of academic administration and politics having mostly unfortunate effects on the fragmentation of knowledge and regimentation of intellectual work. The role of traditional disciplines in the larger social process of knowledge production is clearly undergoing some changes (Gibbons et al., 1994). On the other hand, the department-discipline system that emerged in US academic institutions about a century ago has continued to grow in influence, and studies have found no indication that disciplines are generally declining or in danger of dying out (Abbott, 2001; Clark, 1987).[1]

Disciplines are commonly discussed using certain metaphors. Along with arboreal metaphors (each discipline a branch on the tree of knowledge), what we might call real estate metaphors are ubiquitous in the discourse of disciplines. We speak of disciplinary "foundations", "fields" of knowledge, "turf wars" among disciplines with competing claims to overlapping curricular "territories" and so on. These metaphors are useful in some ways and yet deeply misleading if taken too literally. Disciplines do not in fact occupy clearly bounded, mutually exclusive territories, nor are they built upon rock-solid conceptual foundations. No academic discipline among the humanities or social sciences has the degree of intellectual distinctiveness and coherence that these metaphors imply; all disciplines are heterogeneous, contentious, and shameless borrowers.[2] Equally misleading, however, is the dialectical opposite of the idealized image of disciplinary coherence, the cynical view that academic disciplines, being mere creatures of administrative convenience and petty academic politics, have no intelligible coherence, no intrinsic intellectual value. The idealized and cynical views both reflect a *foundationalist Either/Or*, the false assumption that every discipline *either* must have a fully coherent theoretical-epistemological foundation, *or* it can have no rational basis at all.

This article highlights an alternative cluster of metaphors for discussing disciplines. In this alternative way of speaking, a discipline is "a conversational community with a tradition of argumentation" (Shotter, 1997, p. 42) that participates along with other disciplines in a broader conversational community — the conversation of disciplines — with its own traditions of argumentation.[3] Academic disciplines are not founded upon eternally fixed categories of knowledge; they are discursive formations that emerge, evolve, transform, and dissipate in the ongoing conversation of disciplines. Rhetorical resources for constructing and legitimizing disciplines can be found in contexts of intellectual, institutional, and sociocultural history: *intellectual* contexts of classic and current texts, theories, problems, methods and modes of analysis; *institutional* contexts of universities and departments, professional organizations, funding agencies, publishers, libraries, databases,

and associated classification schemes; and *sociocultural* contexts of ordinary concepts and practices more or less deeply ingrained in the cultural belief systems and habits of the general society. Thus, a disciplinary voice derives its strength — its disciplinary authority — from its resonance with discourses throughout society (its relevance to cultural practices and beliefs) as well as from its intellectual distinctiveness and productivity and its entrenchment in existing institutional schemes of organization. Every discipline draws from a complex mixture of institutional, intellectual, and cultural resources, and negotiates the tensions among these different sources of legitimacy in specific ways. Every discipline participates in the conversation of disciplines in its own evolving ways, using the specific mix of discursive resources available to it at any given time.

Although the conversation of disciplines is concentrated most densely in academic institutions and scholarly professions, it involves participants from throughout society insofar as academic disciplines resonate with a wider culture. All disciplines are reflexively involved with cultural practices of the general society, but some disciplines especially depend on this relationship as a source of legitimacy and authority. The term *practical discipline* refers to a type of discipline that recursively cultivates the very social practices that constitute the discipline's specific subject matter (Craig, 1989, 2006). Practical disciplines necessarily rely on sociocultural relevance as an especially important source of legitimacy. A practical discipline typically emerges and is considered important not because of some intellectual breakthrough that suddenly reveals a whole new range of research problems (in the way that the discovery of DNA's molecular structure led to a new discipline of molecular biology or Noam Chomsky's invention of transformational-generative grammar revolutionized the discipline of linguistics). Rather, a practical discipline grows to prominence because it credibly purports to be useful for addressing some range of practical concerns already acknowledged as such in society.

Communication has acquired many of the institutional-professional trappings of an academic discipline but as an intellectual tradition it remains radically heterogeneous and largely derivative (Craig, 1999). What mainly explains the field's disciplinary emergence is its significant relationship to communication as a category of social practice, and it is, I argue, by reconstructing its intellectual traditions around that category that the field can best hope not only to become more intellectually coherent and productive but more useful to society as well. Communication's specific character as a discipline can thus be understood in terms of its contributions to knowledge in certain intellectual traditions, its evolving institutional forms, and its relevance to "communication" understood as a socioculturally constituted category of problems and practices, but the third of these factors — the sociocultural context of disciplinarity — has, I maintain, a primary role. Communication as a practical discipline has been constructed upon (even as it reflexively reconstructs) the foundation of communication as an increasingly central category in modern societies and global culture. If communication is now a discipline, it is because communication scholars

have seized a rhetorical opportunity. Leveraging the commonsense relevance of their topic, they have gained access to institutional and intellectual resources that they have adapted and transformed as means for addressing "problems of communication" in society. In this way they have brought an important new voice to the conversation of disciplines.

The following sections develop this argument in two main parts. The first part examines a variety of ways in which the idea of a discipline has been conceptualized and argues for a new theory according to which complex mixtures of intellectual, institutional, and sociocultural resources enable diverse and evolving forms of disciplinarity. The second part argues that the communication discipline will be sustained as a legitimate academic enterprise insofar as its disciplinary practices engage with, inform, and productively cultivate the social practice of communication.

A Theory of Disciplinarity

Derived from the Latin *disciplina*, "discipline" in one of its standard senses has long meant simply any field of knowledge or learning. It can also denote the qualities of self-control and orderliness that are required to master a discipline or the process of training or education in which those qualities are imparted. The scholar who learns a discipline (and thereby acquires discipline) was originally called a "disciple" (*discipulus*), and the disciple's opposite was the teacher or "doctor." The doctor's teaching was based on a "doctrine" (*doctrina*), a set of principles related to the discipline. "[H]ence, in the history of the words, doctrine is more concerned with abstract theory, and discipline with practice or exercise" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 741).[4] This distinction is no longer common. "Discipline" now tends to cover both the theoretical and practical senses, and if anything the theoretical sense probably predominates in academic usage. As Kaplan (1993) noted, "the heritage of the Renaissance has been a consideration of disciplines as fields of knowledge — accumulations of data, facts, or texts that one masters in order to have command of a discipline" (p. 56).[5] In current academic usage, however, fields of knowledge are bound up in complex ways with organized scholarly professions and academic departments.

Disciplines in the Modern University

With the development of modern research universities since the nineteenth century, the practical sense of discipline as practice and exercise has been largely eclipsed by an institutional sense that refers to *a certain ill-defined set of academic units and professional groups along with their associated fields of knowledge*. The "discipline of anthropology" thus includes the subject matter of anthropology along with university departments of anthropology and the group of scholars who work in those departments. To apply the term

discipline to such a conglomeration confers upon it a vague but highly valued aura of academic legitimacy.

The complexity of this current discourse was well captured by Becher (1989). In current usage, he wrote,

> [t]he concept of an academic discipline is not altogether straightforward. ... The answer [as to whether a given field of learning is a discipline] will depend on the extent to which leading academic institutions recognize [it] in terms of their organizational structures ... and also on the degree to which a freestanding international community has emerged, with its own professional associations and specialist journals. ... Disciplines are thus in part identified by the existence of relevant departments; but it does not follow that every department represents a discipline. International currency is an important criterion, as is a general though not sharply-defined set of notions of academic credibility, intellectual substance, and appropriateness of subject matter. Despite such apparent complications, however, people with any interest and involvement in academic affairs seem to have little difficulty in understanding what a discipline is, or in taking a confident part in discussions about borderline or dubious cases. (p. 19)

Some definitions of discipline stress the intellectual qualities of disciplines while others emphasize their organizational and professional characteristics, but Becher concluded that the intellectual and institutional aspects "are so inextricably connected that it is unproductive to try to forge any sharp division between them" (1989, p. 20).

Although I agree with Becher that these aspects of disciplinarity interact so closely that they are ultimately inseparable, I believe it is useful to separate them analytically if only to understand more clearly how they interact. In so doing we find, moreover, that a full understanding of the concept of discipline requires that we distinguish not just two but three interacting sources of disciplinarity; that disciplinarity has *sociocultural* as well as intellectual and professional-institutional components.

Disciplines and Sociocultural Categories

Even the most well established academic disciplines might cease to exist were the cultural values and categories that sustain them to dissipate. Bronowski (1972) pointed out that science, for example, expresses values such as the impulse to explore, freedom from tradition and authority, and the testing of truth in experience. The academic practice of science would be difficult to sustain in a sociocultural milieu that did not cultivate such values to some degree.

Historically, according to Toulmin, "the fact that science has developed with such vigor and fertility in Western Europe since A.D. 1600 is a consequence, not least, of an active resonance between scientific specialists and the general public, and of the interaction of ideas between the newly emerging special sciences and the wider culture of the time"

(1972, p. 298). In this process, elements of the scientific worldview were gradually incorporated into "common sense" while growing public interest helped to sustain the intellectual and institutional growth of science.

But, if disciplines can be invigorated by their resonance with the wider culture, they can also be enervated by loss of contact with the general public if they become excessively specialized, technically sophisticated, and professionally insular. "A science which cuts itself off entirely from the broader intellectual debate will thus retain only localized significance; its professional technicalities will have no power to influence "common sense" or "common knowledge," and the science itself will be in danger either of expiring, or falling into the hands of second rate men (sic), for lack of good new recruits to cultivate it" (Toulmin, 1972, pp. 296-297). Toulmin cited Babylonian astronomy as a striking example, but his point applies equally well, although perhaps in less drastic ways, to modern disciplines.

Disciplines rise and decline along with the cultural practices and beliefs that sustain them. Thus the 19th and 20th century development of psychology and sociology responded to evolving sociocultural trends.[6] As Osborne & Rose (1997) showed, for example, prior to its formulation as sociological theory in the late 19th century, "the social point of view" (p. 91 and elsewhere) emerged in practical, problem-oriented, often technical discourses about medicine and disease, crime, government, social surveys and statistics, and so on.

A discipline extends beyond professional academia into publisher's categories, popular media, philanthropic programs, and the like — institutional structures that weave the discipline into the social fabric. A discipline that is culturally meaningful attracts students, public recognition, and funding. The disciplinary professional becomes a recognizable social type such as the scientist, the psychologist, the economist, or the teacher.

Gergen (1995), discussing the early twentieth century efforts to legitimate psychology as a discipline, noted how disciplinary legitimacy relied in part on the support of an educated public. "[T]he central challenge for psychology, then, was to generate forms of self-representation that could simultaneously appeal to audiences both within the academy and among the educated public — in addition to its own membership" (Gergen, 1995, p. 5; see also: Brown, 1992; Leary, 1992).

The relationship between disciplines and sociocultural categories is not unidirectional. The central ideas and values of established disciplines filter into the culture and help to constitute the very categories that sustain the discipline's meaningfulness. Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration attributes this constitutive role distinctly to social science (the "double hermeneutic" in which sociological interpretations of society inform the self-interpretations of social actors); however, the point applies to all disciplines insofar as all disciplines constitute systems of social action. Natural science, for example, not only is sustained by certain cultural values but also is a powerful social influence sustaining those very same values. Pierce (1991) extended the point to other disciplines:

> The reification of a discipline's subject matter in the academic world comes to dominate its treatment in other contexts. The establishment of such university disciplines as "physics" or "sociology" results in the provision of credentials to persons uniquely qualified to serve as "physicists" or "sociologists" in external applications of the subject, spreading reified definitions of the discipline and its content throughout society as a whole. (Pierce, 1991, p. 25)

If disciplines depend on their sociocultural relevance for legitimacy, can even a well-established academic discipline dissipate along with the cultural categories that formerly sustained it? Consider the case of literature. No discipline, or so it might seem from a narrow historical focus, could be more academically traditional or more deeply entrenched in universities than literary studies, but in *The Death of Literature* (1990) Alvin Kernan argued provocatively, as his title suggests, that academic literary studies are in serious danger of extinction along with "literature" as a cultural category. "[T]he disintegration of romantic-modernist literature in the late twentieth century," he wrote,

> has been a part not only of a general cultural revolution but more specifically of a technological revolution that is rapidly transforming a print to an electronic culture .... [T]he old literature of romanticism and modernism was a printed-book concept from the outset, institutionalizing and idealizing print's potential to create authors, fix exact texts, hold the smallest detail of style locked permanently in place for leisured inspection, and assemble and catalog the imaginary library of universal literature. Literature began to lose its authority, and consequently its reality, at the same time that the ability to read the book, literacy, was decreasing, that audiovisual images, film, television, and computer screen, were replacing the printed book as the most efficient and preferred source of entertainment and knowledge. Television, computer database, Xerox, word processor, tape, and VCR are not symbiotic with literature and its values in the way that print was, and new ways of acquiring, storing, and transmitting information are signaling the end of a conception of writing and reading oriented to the printed book and institutionalized as literature. (p. 9)

Kernan concluded:

> [L]iterature is disappearing into another category of reality where it is becoming only one technique for written communication, one among many ways, oral, pictorial, schematic, and many modes, print, television, radio, VCR, cassette, record, and CD, by which information can be assembled, organized, and transmitted effectively. (p. 201)

Kernan foresaw emerging from the ashes of literature a new discipline, "communications, a subject with both practical and theoretical dimensions, and considerable usefulness" (1990, p. 202).[7]

Disciplines in the Conversation of Disciplines

Disciplines can be understood with reference to: ways in which philosophical schemes of disciplines interact with the inertial and political forces of academic-professional institutions (Machlup, 1982, pp. 89 & 119); how the inherent characteristics of subject matters shape disciplinary practices (Becher, 1989) and how they *should* do so (Collier, 1992; Toulmin, 1972), or conversely, how forms of disciplinary organization shape intellectual activities (Fuchs, 1992; Pierce, 1991); how a discipline is shaped by its institutional resource base (Turner & Turner, 1990); or how "fractal" patterns are endlessly reproduced in disciplinary cultures and social structures (Abbott, 2001). As the metaphor of the conversation suggests, the approach advanced in this article is *hermeneutical* (Gadamer, 2006). Absolute disciplinary coherence is neither possible nor desirable. Disciplinary "foundations" are recursive reconstructions of disciplinary practices within a hermeneutic circle of interpretation and action. Disciplinary coherence is a matter of interpreting a tradition of argumentation in which intellectual, institutional, and sociocultural practices interact — a practical, hermeneutical problem that arises within the conversation of disciplines.

"[T]he various disciplinary enterprises rely upon models and paradigms borrowed from each other, and never less so than when they proclaim their independence, so that the mutual relation of the disciplines is never one of autonomy or of heteronomy, but some sort of complicated set of textual relations that needs to be unraveled in each instance" (Godzich, 1986, p. x; see also Abbott, 2001). For example, the "sociological perspective" of sociology can be defined only against a background that includes sociology's differences from history (Burke, 1992), anthropology (Mills, 2001), economics (Massey, 1999), and other disciplines (Brewer, 2007). Classic writings in sociology assert the uniqueness and importance of a sociological perspective with compelling intellectual force, but sociologists themselves have always disagreed about the meaning and value of such a perspective. The sociological tradition can be read as a series of arguments about how and how much sociology differs from various other disciplines. Approaches within sociology can be described as economic, cultural, historical, political, psychological, and so forth. Thus the conversation within sociology internalizes the conversation between sociology and other disciplines (indeed it constitutes much of that interdisciplinary conversation, for the conversation "among" disciplines occurs within disciplines to a large extent). The intellectual center of sociology moves with the shifting focus of a conversation about the meaning and value of a sociological perspective on society. If it were generally concluded among sociologists that the sociological perspective lacked meaning or value in their work as compared to other, more valid and useful perspectives — if, in effect, the idea of a sociological perspective were no longer felt to be worth discussing — then the conversation would break up or turn to other topics and sociology would cease to exist as an intellectually sensible enterprise. The discipline would then continue only as an increasingly pointless, however deeply

entrenched institutional shell housing various unrelated research specialties under the name of an exhausted intellectual tradition. However unlikely this scenario may seem, sociologists have recurrently expressed the fear that something like it may be happening (Halliday & Janowitz, 1992; Osborne & Rose, 1997; Turner & Turner, 1990). These worries about disciplinary status are indeed something of a tradition in sociology. As the last of the major social sciences to be established (1890s), sociology faced problems of field definition and didn't coalesce in England (where anthropology had dominated) until after WWII (see Ross, 1991, pp. 131, 255).[8]

Gergen (1995), writing about the history of psychology, similarly noted that a discipline, in order to legitimize itself must distinguish itself from other disciplines in the academy, yet "its rationale would have to achieve intelligibility in those very disciplines" (p. 5). The identity of each discipline can be established only vis-à-vis its jostling competitors, its dialogical others in the conversation of disciplines.

With this background on the interacting intellectual, institutional and sociocultural contexts of disciplinary identity and authority, we now turn to consider the case of communication as a discipline.

RECONSTRUCTING COMMUNICATION AS A DISCIPLINE

Concerning the place of rhetorical studies in US communication departments, Keith, Fuller, Gross, and Leff (1999) wrote:

> The history of Speech Communication, like any other discipline, has been a dialectic between conceptual formations and institutional structures. Sometimes ... institutions were molded in the image of a particular concept ... other times, conceptual accounts chased institutional arrangements ... Neither side of the dialectic is right or wrong; the problem lies in the refusal to engage it, in the pretense that institutions and theories are already aligned according to some master plan. (1999, p. 332)

How shall we engage the dialectic? As we have seen, social and rhetorical analyses of disciplines have shown that their development interacts with cultural as well as institutional and economic forces (see also: Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993). If knowledge is regarded idealistically, then these "external" influences can appear only as sources of corruption (Collier, 1992). But if disciplines are regarded as intellectual-institutional-sociocultural complexes, then the question is not whether extra-intellectual factors will have a role, but what role they will have and how the resulting tensions may be best resolved. When, as in the case of communication, the institutional development of a discipline, driven by cultural and economic forces, has outrun its intellectual development, then social and rhetorical studies of the discipline may have primarily a hermeneutical task, not to show how these cultural and economic factors have contaminated or distorted

knowledge, but rather to clarify the intellectual and cultural significance of the evolving institutional formation of the discipline.

Problematizing Communication

Institutional changes that have brought diverse areas of communication study together in unified academic-professional structures are driving the search for intellectual coherence (O'Keefe, 1993; see also Pierce, 1991), but I believe it can be shown that those institutional changes themselves have followed a cultural logic that is, potentially, the discipline's primary source of intellectual coherence. The core subject matter of a practical discipline, as noted earlier, is the very sociocultural practices that sustain the discipline's commonsense meaningfulness in society. The institutionalized discipline makes use of the resources afforded by its (perhaps mostly borrowed) intellectual traditions to reconstruct and cultivate particular social practices, thus institutionalizing a recursive loop of theory and practice (Carey, 1989; Craig, 1989, 1999, 2006). Although the institutional, intellectual, and cultural-practical aspects are all necessary to the formation of a practical discipline, the sociocultural practices that sustain the discipline and constitute its focal subject matter have, as I have argued, a primary role.

In order for a practical discipline to flourish, three factors must be present. First, the discipline must address social problems and practices that are regarded as important by the general public. In other words, it must be socially relevant. Second, it must have something interesting and useful to say about those problems and practices. It must have cognitive content. It must offer access to productive intellectual resources, rooted in rich and lively traditions of academic thought, which can be applied to understand and reconstruct those important and problematic social practices. Third, it must find a secure home and resource base in academic institutions. Thus, communication is warranted as a practical discipline insofar as it effectively marshals its available institutional and intellectual resources to address "problems of communication" in society, thereby growing in all three dimensions of disciplinary authority (intellectual, institutional, and sociocultural).

The field of communication is not yet well entrenched institutionally and its intellectual contributions, while hardly negligible, are not yet of such weight as to explain its apparent emergence toward disciplinary status. An academic discipline has coalesced like a mass of iron filings around a powerful sociocultural magnet, "*communication*." The communication discipline cannot but locate its own central problematic in the "problem of communication" so increasingly familiar in modern societies and global culture, where communication has become not just a problem but rather a characteristic way of posing all problems (McKeon, 1957; see also: Craig, 2006; Deetz, 1994; Peters, 1999).

Commonsense ideas and practices of communication have evolved in historically specific circumstances (Cameron, 2000; Carey, 1989; Deetz, 1994; Mattelart, 1996; Peters, 1999, in press; Schiller, 1996). This has been intensely the case in the USA, where the

communication discipline first took root. Fears, hopes, and practical opportunities arising from the ongoing development of mass media and communication technology certainly have had a large role in this process. The idea of communication also resonates strongly with themes in American culture such as individualism and the drive toward self-improvement, faith in technology and progress, and the chronically expressed need for stronger bonds of social community under conditions of sociocultural diversity and rapid change. The eruption of the communication idea around the world in globalized forms and in culturally adapted localized forms needs to be understood within the general process of economic and cultural globalization with all its attendant puzzles and controversies. The rapid international growth of the academic communication field is bound up in ways we have yet to understand with the emergence of "communication" as a keyword in global culture (Craig, in press). Understanding this relationship is an urgent research problem at the discipline's foundation. The recent formation of the Russian Communication Association and the appearance of publications such as *Russian Journal of Communication* signify Russia's participation in this global process of discipline formation and call upon scholars to interpret "communication" and address "problems of communication" specifically in terms of Russian culture, thus also enriching the global conversation.

As Deetz (1994) pointed out, the fundamental social problems that both explain and call for the emergence of a communication discipline are not simply found in the world but are constituted by particular ways of engaging with the world:

> In looking at the formation of a discipline$_3$ [a distinct mode of explanation], co-extensive with the formulation of a way of attending to the world is the constitution of a social problematic. As I have suggested, this is neither a causal relation going from a way of attending to problem conception nor one from problem situation to a way of attending. They historically arise together as a problematization in a competitive environment of alternative attentions and problems. And, as the pragmatists argued, the basic question is not which one is right or most critical but rather what kind of people do we want to become and what kind of world do we wish to live in. (p. 584, bracketed words added)

Disciplinary coherence will be found only in our engagement with this problematization of communication both globally and locally.

Joining the Conversation of Disciplines

Communication, like sociology, suffers from disciplinary incoherence, but of a different origin. Sociology has an acknowledged central tradition of classic, seminal works but seems in danger of breaking up as its various specialties turn away from that disciplinary core and migrate toward other disciplines (Scott, 2005).[9] Communication still lacks an established disciplinary core of classic theories and research exemplars. The field comprises

diverse academic traditions, each having produced or appropriated its own, more or less coherent intellectual resources, which have converged institutionally under the culturally resonant symbolic banner of "communication" and are only now just beginning to overcome their mutual ignorance. Journalism and media scholars have their reasons for migrating to that banner, as do scholars in cultural studies, conversation analysis, and rhetoric, but they are not the same reasons, and the differences among them and the implications they hold for one another have not yet been much explored.

The diversity of the field has been acknowledged as a problem or celebrated as a strength, but has not yet been exploited for the generation of fresh insights and the construction of a richer, more encompassing disciplinary perspective on communication. Thus, the problem of a disciplinary core in communication studies is, in more than one sense, a communication problem, now complicated, as noted earlier, by the growing cultural complexity and variability of the communication idea as it spreads globally. The question in communication studies is not whether the disciplinary conversation will break up but how to get it actually started (Craig, 1999, 2007). The communication problem in the discipline must be addressed in order to generate the intellectual resources needed to address the communication problem in society. Communication can become a discipline only by being practical — by marshalling its resources to address the communication problems that are its *raison d'etre*. But it can become practical in this way only by finding its voice in the conversation of disciplines.

In the formation of a communication discipline, "the problem of communication in society" must be reconstructed within the intellectual traditions drawn to or appropriated by the discipline of communication as it works through its disciplinary affinities and tensions both internal and external. The conversation between communication and other disciplines will appear internally as a debate among proponents of sociological, psychological, linguistic/semiotic, and other ways of theorizing communication (Craig, 1999). Disciplinary coherence is thus a hermeneutical problem faced by a heterogeneous set of evolving traditions that find themselves institutionally linked and without any well-articulated pattern connecting them to each other, to other disciplines, and to their common, practical task *vis-à-vis* the cultural discourse of "communication."

The rapid institutionalization of communication as an academic discipline so far owes less to the importance of its intellectual contributions than to the economic importance of communication skills and occupations, supported by the widespread cultural belief that interpersonal and social problems are caused by bad communication and can be alleviated by good communication (Cameron, 2000; Peters, 1999). The authority of the new discipline derives mainly from the power of "communication" as a symbol that evokes the most characteristic problems and opportunities of an increasingly diverse yet interdependent world. The field has attracted students and institutional resources not primarily because its scientific fruitfulness has been proven beyond question but because its topic is considered important, meaningful, and especially, useful. Communication, if a discipline at all, is thus

unavoidably a practical discipline. But a practical discipline must be more than just practical, it must also be a discipline; its particular way of being useful is that it approaches practical problems *as a discipline*. It theorizes practice from a disciplinary point of view. It participates simultaneously in several worlds — several conversations: the conversation of ideas, the conversation of institutionalized academic disciplines, and the conversation of society — and its distinctive contribution to each of these conversations depends on what it is able to learn within the others. That is its special task as a discipline.

NOTES

1. The debate on disciplines is as old as the disciplines themselves and involves a wide range of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and antidisciplinary views on academic work. For reasons of space, neither the widely dispersed general literature on disciplines nor the long-running debates about the disciplinary status of communication and its predecessor fields (speech, etc.) can be fully reviewed in this article. On disciplines in general, see: Abbott (2001); Becher (1989); Campbell (1969); Clark (1987); Foucault (1970); Fuchs (1992); Fuller (1991); Gibbons, et al. (1994); Gross & Keith (1996); Kline (1996); Lee & Wallerstein (2005); Machlup (1982); Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan (1993); Ross (1991); Stichweh (1992); Toulmin (1972); Turner (2006); Wernick (2006). See Craig (in press) for a brief history of the debate on communication as a discipline; see also: Anderson, et al. (1988); Angus & Lannamann (1988); Benson (1992); Berger & Chaffee (1987); Craig (1989); Craig & Carlone (1998); Deetz (1994); Donsbach (2006); Levy & Gurevitch (1993); Paisley (1984); Peters (1986); Putnam (2001). Benson (1985) remains the best general source on speech or speech communication as a discipline; see also: Benson (1992); Craig (1991); Keith (in press).

2. Clyde Kluckholm famously described anthropology as "an intellectual poaching license" (Geertz, 1980, p. 167). In communication we poach even more, and without a license.

3. On intellectual traditions as argumentative conversations, see: MacIntyre (1981, 1990); Shotter (1993).

4. Teaching is, then, in a certain sense, "indoctrination" (Shepherd, 1993, p. 83). See also: Turner (2006).

5. Levine, for example, defined discipline as a "discrete body of knowledge with a characteristic regimen for investigation and analysis" (cited in Nothstine, Blair, & Copeland, 1994, p. 57).

6. On psychology and sociology interacting with sociocultural trends, see: Brown (1992); Coleman (1980); Deetz (1994); Halliday & Janowitz (1992); Herman (1995); Giddens (1984); Leary (1992); Lepenies (1988); Mazlish (1989); Osborne (1997); Porter (1995); Richards (1995); Rose (1996); Ross (1991); Turner & Turner (1990).

7. On the problems of literature as a discipline, see also: Delbanco (1999), Scholes (1998); Woodring (1999). Fuller (1991, p. 191) referred to literature's progressive irrelevancy.

8. On the history and disciplinary identity of sociology, see also: Collins (1985); How (1998); Lepenies (1986); Levine (1995); Mazlish (1989); Scott (2005); Turner (2006).

9. Swanson (1993) argued that this is happening in communication as well, which may be true; however, convergent processes also seem to be at work in this field. Deetz (1994) would correlate the fragmentation of sociology with the breakup of its underlying problematic of social order.

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