

# Teaching Organizational Culture

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**Objective:** *To identify and differentiate among three communication perspectives in organizational culture research*

**Courses:** *Organizational Communication, Communication in the Workplace, Organizational Culture and Change*

## Rationale

Different perspectives exist for studying organizational communication. Organizational culture is presented as one of those perspectives, but undergraduate texts do not fully explain the assumptions that support the study of organizational culture or illuminate the relationship between organizational discourse and organizational culture. As a result, the study of culture is often reduced to the identification of artifacts, values, and assumptions. Further explanation and instruction are warranted if students are to understand the connections among these ideas as well why they are relevant to a communication course.

An agonistic approach to teaching organizational discourse and culture can help students unpack the relationship between these concepts. In ancient Greece, an *agon* was a contest ranging from a wrestling match to a debate. Priority was not placed on the outcome but rather on the encounter between competitors, which enabled them to improve and refine skills (Hawhee, 2002). Similarly, the focus of an agonistic teaching approach does not privilege one perspective over others, nor is its goal to select an optimal perspective. Rather, it seeks insight from the encounter with divergent approaches. Such encounters can reveal healthy tensions and provide understanding beyond any single theory or paradigmatic lens.

Agonistic approaches have been used to describe organizational culture and organizational discourse. Martin (2002) offers a three-perspective theory of culture, which both highlights and hides various insights provided by each approach: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. Using Martin's nexus approach,

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organizations may be viewed in three separate but related ways. However, Martin focuses primarily on culture itself and does not fully explicate the role of communication in organizational culture.

Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) offer an agonistic approach of three major orientations reflected in contemporary research on organizational discourse: object orientation, becoming orientation, and grounded in action orientation. While their approach is firmly grounded in communication, we see a natural application of their approach to organizational culture, given the interdependence of these two elements, thereby drawing on both models. Both agonistic approaches are a helpful foundation, as they clearly demonstrate multiple ways to examine the same concept, as well as the tensions of doing so. There are a number of advantages to using an agonistic approach to explore the relationships among culture and discourse. First, organizational culture and discourse are held *constant*, that is, treated as defined entities that can be scrutinized. Second, comparisons among divergent orientations are *possible*. Finally, these comparisons allow for a multi-faceted view of a phenomenon from divergent, competing orientations *simultaneously*.

This essay presents a teaching unit on organizational culture, which utilizes an agonistic approach while also emphasizing the role of communication in the study of organizational culture. Our approach presents three perspectives of the relationship between organizational discourse and organizational culture. Lecture information, a reading assignment, a written assignment, and classroom activities are presented.

### **The Activity**

The activity follows a lecture and discussion about organizational discourse's (e.g. a meeting) relationship to organizational culture. For this unit, students first participate in a lecture regarding three dominant perspectives in the communication literature regarding the relationships among organizational discourse and organizational culture.

### *The Lecture*

Adapting Fairhurst and Putnam's (2004) three orientations on discourse and organization, we apply their model to organizational discourse and culture. First, from the *object orientation*, researchers assume that organizational cultures can be measured and changed in order to influence discourse. In other words, culture exists before discourse. Second, the *becoming orientation* considers discourse as constituting the culture. In this view, discourse exists prior to the culture and serves an organizing function. The third perspective, the *grounded in action orientation*, considers neither discourse nor culture to be primary, but views them as mutually constitutive, influencing each other simultaneously. Table 1 provides a summary comparison of the three orientations. Video explanations are available online;<sup>1</sup> PowerPoint® slides, and a list of research reports illustrating the orientations<sup>2</sup> are available from the authors.

**Table 1** Agonistic Approach to Organizational Discourse and Culture by Orientation

| Orientation        | Characteristics  | Advantages   | Disadvantages   |
|--------------------|--|--|---|
| Object             | Culture exists prior to discourse<br>Culture is measurable<br>Culture shapes discourse<br>Culture is static, fixed                             | Emphasizes controlling features of culture<br>Limits phenomenon of culture                                       | Minimizes external forces<br>Mitigates individual responsibility                      |
| Becoming           | Discourse exists prior to culturing<br>Discourse and culturing are dynamic<br>Discourse shapes culturing<br>Culture is in the present          | Directs focus to importance of communication<br>Emphasizes individual choice in discursive action                | Overemphasizes the influence of current discourse<br>Overlooks material constraints   |
| Grounded in Action | Discourse and culture are mutually constitutive<br>Discourse is enabled and constrained by culture<br>Culture is in past and present discourse | Directs focus to the importance of time<br>Emphasizes both individual choice and controlling features of culture | Overemphasizes the influence of past interaction<br>Privileges discourse over culture |

### *Object orientation*

The object orientation argues that cultures can be measured and changed to influence discourse. Researchers taking an object orientation tend to ask questions such as, “How does the culture shape discourse?” They examine organizational cultures that create, sustain, or hinder successful and effective organizational discourse. From this orientation, the culture is an entity existing prior to and independent of discursive activity. From the object orientation, the culture has definite boundaries while discourse is merely an outcome. The culture created by the sum of organizational procedures and policies enables and constrains the discursive action of organizational members. Advantages and disadvantages of this perspective are summarized in Table 1.

### *Becoming orientation*

Scholars who take a becoming orientation tend to ask, “How is discourse culturing?” They seek to uncover properties of discourse and linguistic forms that create, sustain, or challenge culturing. The assumption is that discourse possesses culturing properties, and that, as a result, culture is always in a state of becoming and is never fixed. From the becoming orientation, discourse is always ongoing and produces culture as an outcome. These culturing properties dynamically reinforce or challenge the organization’s culture, turn by turn and word by word. Advantages and disadvantages of this perspective are summarized in Table 1.

### *Grounded in action orientation*

The third orientation assumes that discourse and culture are mutually constitutive. Scholars who take a grounded in action orientation tend to ask, “How are the constancies of organizational culture fixed in the dynamic flow of discourse?” They investigate how organizational members appropriate the rules and resources gained from previous interactions in their present conversations. From the grounded in action orientation, culture is found at the level of everyday interaction as enabled and constrained by past interactions. The grounded in action orientation emphasizes the mutual influence of discourse over culture *and* culture over discourse. Organizational members’ interactions are simultaneously enabled and constrained by the culture; at the same time, the culture is reinforced or challenged with every new interaction. Advantages and disadvantages of this perspective are summarized in Table 1.

### *Reading and Writing Assignment*

After the lecture, students are assigned to read the three organizational culture research reports (e.g. Schrodt, 2002; Fairhurst & Cooren, 2004; Banks, 1994) that demonstrate the object, becoming, and grounded in action perspectives, respectively) and complete the following writing assignment.

In an essay, answer the following questions for each of the three research articles. In the final paragraph, summarize your analysis and conclude with an insight about the relationships among organizational discourse and culture.

1. Based on your reading, to which orientation of organizational discourse and culture does this article belong (i.e. object, becoming, or grounded in action)? Explain.
2. Based on evidence presented in the article, do the authors presume culture is shaping discourse or is discourse shaping culture within the organization? Be specific and use evidence from the research study.
3. According to the article, which groups of organizational members are most responsible for the creation and maintenance of culture? What specific evidence are you using to make this claim?

The writing assignment may be evaluated using the following questions.

1. Is the correct orientation stated clearly? Is adequate support provided to justify this choice? Is additional explanation provided that clarifies why the other orientations do not fit what is explained in the article?
2. Is a clear answer given about the direction of influence between culture and discourse? Are at least three quality pieces of evidence provided?
3. Are specific groups of organizational members mentioned? Is a clear reason for this given? Are at least two pieces of evidence provided to support the claim?
4. Does the paper contain a final paragraph providing insight into the relationship between discourse and culture? Does the paper provide a consistent and convincing argument?

### **Debrief, Appraisal, and Variations**

After the lecture, reading assignment, and writing assignment, students should be able to examine various orientations and definitional assumptions in organizational culture research. The learning opportunities afforded by the agonistic approach and this framework are limitless. First, questions for the written analysis can be used for classroom discussion. This assignment can also dovetail with other organizational culture assignments presented in *Communication Teacher*. For example, Morgan (2004) offers an *active learning presentation* activity in which students in small groups read original research to learn more about organizational culture. Each group investigates and presents a cultural form (e.g., ceremony, metaphor) to the class. The instructor could follow these presentations by facilitating a cross-group comparison and discussion of the orientations manifested in the articles. Additionally, this unit could highlight the grounded in action orientation that serves as the basis of Shapiro's (2006) *balloons in the air* activity. The balloon activity simulates for students the discourse required to perform the organization and its primary activity (i.e., keeping the balloons in the air), and hence, the organization's culture.

Furthermore, short case studies or popular press pieces could be assigned for all students to read prior to class. Then the instructor could divide the class into three groups (one for each approach) and facilitate a class-wide debate during which students would justify why their assigned approach best represents the organizational

culture presented in the reading. Depending on the level of the class (e.g., an introductory organizational communication course), the instructor may wish to provide talking points or prompts that contain brief summaries of the approach and a number of questions for consideration in the debate, perhaps as a course capstone.

Turning contradictory perspectives that spawn interesting academic debates into reasonable pedagogy for our students can be difficult. We answer the oft-heard call for more suitable strategies for translating abstract and disparate theoretical assumptions by presenting three interpretations of the communication–culture relationship. The agonistic approach presented here adds *discourse* to Martin’s (2002) model of organizational culture and *culture* to Fairhurst and Putnam’s (2004) model of organization and discourse.

### Note

1. Videos developed by the authors further explain distinctions among the object, becoming, and grounded in action orientations using a gyroscope as a metaphor. These videos are posted online:
  - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8GEUtqZo\\_Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8GEUtqZo_Q)-Gyroscope as a metaphor for organizational culture and discourse
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG3R73K8rbg>-Object Orientation
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oei0MJV1s4g>-Becoming Orientation
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceiwPyQqao>-Grounded in Action Orientation
2. Instructional materials developed by the authors are available online: <http://www.joannekeyton.com/TeachingOrganizationalCulture.htm>

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