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*Management Learning* 2009; 40; 11  
DOI: 10.1177/1350507608099311

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## Politics Even Closer to Home: Repositioning CME from the Standpoint of Communication Studies

**Abstract** *This essay aims to bring politics closer to home in two main ways. First, we address geographical and disciplinary spaces and identities in order to propose a fruitful ‘breeding ground’ for critical management education (CME) in the US context: organizational and instructional communication studies. Second, we engage recent calls for self-reflexivity among CME scholars, re-directing the critical lens from ‘mainstream’ management education to political dynamics embedded in our own practices. As we articulate possibilities for both institutional, theoretical and practical collaboration, we emphasize how CME and communication scholars might work together to illuminate and transform embodied relations of difference. **Key Words:** classroom interaction; CME; CMS; critical pedagogy; organizational and instructional communication studies; power, identity, and difference (specifically gender, race, class, sexuality); reflexivity; textbooks; text-conversation dialectic*

### Introduction

While critical management studies (CMS) has been mostly occupied with the critique of organizations ‘out there’, a growing body of work on critical management education (CME) directs the critical gaze ‘in here’, on the academic institutions in which the labor of management research and teaching is carried out. CME has generated vital insights about political relations close to home for organizational scholars, illuminating micro-dynamics endemic to classroom practice and curriculum design (e.g. Cavanaugh and Prasad, 1996; Grey et al., 1996), as well as broader institutional patterns like the disciplinary mechanisms of tenure (Boje, 1996) and the rise of productivity accounting systems (Willmott, 1995). Authors attuned to such macro-dynamics frequently claim that national context

shapes CME's institutional possibilities. Many concur that, despite historical shifts and abiding challenges, the UK continues to provide a friendlier home for critical perspectives on management, organization, and work than does the US (Perriton, 2007).

Overwhelmingly, 'mainstream' settings, artifacts, and practices of higher education comprise the central objects of CME. Less common are internal critiques of the CME movement itself (i.e. critique of the critics). Some works engaging such introspection note a lack of political reflexivity regarding key CME articles of faith, like enduring confidence in the critical pedagogue who utilizes rational dialogue to awaken student consciousness and agency (Ellsworth, 1989; Perriton and Reynolds, 2004). Several critics have begun to call out gender, sexual, and racial politics at play in such abstract, disembodied depictions of critical pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989; Reynolds and Trehan, 2001). Arguably, internal critiques of this sort have barely dented the larger CME conversation, which has not yet devoted sustained attention to relations of difference—that is, intersections among gender, sexuality, race, class, and so forth—as these define and delimit the actual experience of critical management pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989; Perriton and Reynolds, 2004).

This essay draws together these two developments: (1) pessimism about the institutional viability of CME in the US and (2) continued reference to generic notions of teacher, student, and manager that downplay embodied relations of difference in CME. We argue that these seemingly unrelated tendencies converge through the lens of *communication studies*, a largely US-based academic discipline in which critical perspectives on both management and education have begun to flourish, and in which awareness of the embodied character of interaction has cultivated particular sensitivity to the mundane politics of difference. With their exclusive attention to business schools, previous characterizations of CME in national context (e.g. Perriton, 2007) tend to overlook important nuances in US management and organization studies: namely, the existence of a thriving community of *organizational communication* scholars trained in a range of critical philosophies, as well as an adjacent community of critical *instructional communication* scholars who theorize interaction specific to educational settings. As it houses both of these sub-fields, the discipline of communication studies stands to redress the two developments just mentioned by providing (a) a useful institutional foothold for CME in the US that eludes many of the obstacles documented in business schools and (b) a supportive ally for reflexivity on the embodied politics of difference at work in CME.

Thus, in the spirit of the essay's title, we seek to bring politics 'even closer to home' in two ways: first, by addressing geographical, disciplinary, and institutional spaces and identities; and second, by engaging recent calls for political reflexivity not only about 'mainstream' management education, but also about CME relations. In other words, 'home' as invoked in this article entails matters of both location and self-reflexivity. We begin our case for the distinctive contributions of communication studies by contextualizing the discipline—and, specifically, the twin sub-fields of organizational and instructional communication—for readers less familiar with this scholarly community. Turning from institutional possibilities to content contributions, we explore how communication and CME scholars might work together to illuminate embodied relations of difference.

As this preview implies, we write from our experience as US critical organizational communication scholars. Our intent is to situate communication studies as a significant ‘sister community’ of CME in the US. We do *not* mean to imply that the field of communication is without its own problems; indeed, we explore some of those most pertinent here. Nor do we mean to suggest communication departments as a substitute for schools of business; after all, the latter will remain the primary site of managerial education for the foreseeable future. Rather, we propose communication studies as a US incubator for CME, encouraging greater inter- and intra-disciplinary networks that join critical scholars from varied settings and perspectives in examining how CME enacts relations of difference.

### **(Re)locating Home: Communication Studies as a Site of Possibility Amid Pessimism**

#### *CME in Broad Strokes: Merging CMS and Critical Pedagogy*

The CME literature has enabled the meeting of CMS and critical pedagogy, the latter emanating mainly from education scholarship and activism. By most accounts, CMS has enjoyed a 20-year history of investigating relations of power in and around organizations (Hassard et al., 2001). Distilling common ground from this theoretically complex and sometimes contentious terrain, we sketch key commitments we share with many others (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Grey and Mitev, 1995; Grey and Willmott, 2005; Perriton and Reynolds, 2004):

- Organizations are a central mechanism for configuring and controlling purposive human activity in the western world. The evolution of contemporary organizations entailed the development of new meanings, relationships, practices, and structures with significant social, cultural, and environmental impact. In particular, organizations have become pivotal sites of identity (re)construction: Through them, we learn much of what we ‘know’ about ourselves and others (Alvesson et al., 2008).
- Organization is a political process and product, and power relations routinely support dominant interests, engendering systematic privilege and marginalization. ‘Dominant interests’ are those aligned with groups who typically enjoy greater access to the means of production and expression (e.g. interests aligned with managerial and professional classes, white men and so on). Put in poststructuralist terms, subjectivities activate different resources for influence. However, enacting any identity—even the patently potent—involves conflict and self-discipline.
- Neat pictures of domination and subordination cannot be rendered. Relations of power develop contextually, requiring sensitivity to local dynamics and variations. Moreover, participants enact many identities simultaneously (e.g. white, able-bodied, middle-class, lesbian, executive); and these intersect in complicated ways. Even the most unyielding systems are fraught with internal tensions (Benson, 1977). Hence, organizational power is neither static nor determined but contingent and shifting, full of loopholes and potential for resistance.

- Power is an ongoing accomplishment, institutionalized yet constantly realized and destabilized through ordinary organizing. Because of this dynamic condition, social transformation is possible.
- Nevertheless, we often reproduce power in ways that eclipse the evident range of interests. As certain relations become entrenched and get coded as normal, natural, and for the greater good, choices are diminished and dialogue silenced. Thus, in the name of self-interest, people ironically tend to preserve the reign of partial interests—a phenomenon with many correlates such as hegemony, discursive closure, disciplinary power, and self-subordination (Deetz, 1992a, 1992b; Mumby, 1997).
- Organizational scholarship can therefore serve emancipatory aims by interrogating power relations as well as alternatives.

By and large, CMS emphasizes the application of such premises to the study of organizational sites wherein the work of management occurs. To a lesser but increasing extent, CMS scholars also examine efforts to organize work beyond the workplace, such as labor organizing (e.g. Cheney and Cloud, 2006) or cultural formations surrounding work (e.g. Carlone and Taylor, 1998). CME redirects the critical enterprise closer to home, casting our own organizational settings as significant cultural sites that organize common notions and configurations of work. In this sense, CME casts CMS scholars as workers whose primary labor is re/producing representations of organization; it positions universities not as neutral places but as political spaces from which management inquiry is conducted (e.g. Danieli and Thomas, 1999; Parker and Jary, 1995).

To accomplish this turn toward home, CME draws on a literature once separated from early articulations of CMS: critical pedagogy, which has long framed education as a political process and product. Others have traced the relationship between CME and critical pedagogy in detail (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004), and we return to such analyses later. For now, it will suffice to note that critical pedagogy applies critical theories to analyze and transform educational institutions through teaching and learning praxis. Critical pedagogy challenges educators to become activists who engage students in redressing inequalities in pedagogical structure and practice, chiefly by exploring together how and for whom knowledge is produced and disseminated and how else it might be (Freire, 1970). Over time, scholars have integrated various critical theoretical developments (e.g. Giroux, 1994; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003), spawning such branches as feminist, performative, queer, and critical whiteness, to name a few (for more on such variants as manifest in communication studies, see Fassett and Warren, 2007). Contemporary critical pedagogy thus shares the sorts of CMS premises condensed here but trains a critical eye on educational contexts, implicating the roles of teachers and students, the pedagogical process, and educational institutions in the cultural organization of identity and power.

CME fuses CMS and critical pedagogy to guide management researchers, teachers, and students in turning the critical gaze inward, cultivating the sort of collective reflection that situates our own work systems in larger social and political fields. As hosted by CME, the conversation between once-disconnected literatures brings a heightened institutional and labor consciousness to critical pedagogy,

while sharpening CMS awareness of how scholarly labor and the management thereof play into the very power dynamics we critique. The productive exchange has informed the politics of management training as performed in the institutional context(s) of higher education. Several CME authors provide critical readings and revisions at the level of management curriculum design and implementation, addressing particular courses and related pedagogical tools and practices. These efforts have revealed, for example, guiding philosophies and tactics by which critical theoretical lenses can be feasibly translated for management student-practitioner audiences (e.g. Cavanaugh and Prasad, 1996; Humphries and Dyer, 2005; Vince, 1996), lessons gleaned from empirical experiences with critical management courses (e.g. Grey et al., 1996; Hagen et al., 2003), and dilemmas in the development of critical management textbooks (e.g. Fulop, 2002). Zooming out to a wider-angle lens, other CME authors confront the macro-contexts of higher education in which management pedagogy occurs. For instance, Boje's analysis concludes rather grimly that 'the management discipline'

constitutes a panoptic machine, where probationary tenure functions as a period of disciplined obedience to the rules; where surveillance is everywhere; where academic freedom, transformed from the Middle Ages, now means intellectual subordination to the more or less plural professorial paradigms . . . This 'total management education' machine makes both professors and students increasingly docile performers. (Boje, 1996: 174)

#### *CME in National Context: Bleak Prospects for a US Home?*

Like a few other CME macro-analyses (see, for instance, the 2002 Special Issue of *Organization*, volume 9, number 3), Boje's (1996) account is set in a North American, and specifically US, academic context. More often, CME scholars write from other settings, especially concentrated in the UK. Willmott (1995), for example, critiques the evolving configuration and control of professorial work in the UK, untangling calls for 'modernization', 'professionalization', and 'rationalization'. Such wide-angle analyses illustrate how CME scholars are increasingly sensitive to the broader politics of location, not only in terms of the academic-business relationships that shape management education, but also in terms of the regional/national scene in which those relationships are cultivated.

Explicating this point most recently, Perriton (2007) synthesizes previous accounts of national context to compare the development of CME in the UK and the US. She argues that CME has blossomed in the UK, though not without challenges, while the growth of CME in the US has been severely stunted by pre-occupation with integrating ethics courses into business school curricula. Perriton explains that critical theories remain crushed by the hegemony of US business schools, which early on tied the national economic agenda to white, middle-class interests and fanned a fixation on rigor via scientific method. Radical CME thus remains an institutional impossibility: as 'U.S. academics were aware that the business school was a fortress that would easily repel' CMS interventions, their efforts narrowed to a shortsighted focus on 'how CMS fitted into business schools rather than on the critiques it offered management theory' (Perriton, 2007: 75). Ethics became the basis for legitimacy claims in the US, fostering a comparatively confined and conservative CME movement.

Perriton (2007) concludes that CME's connection to a long tradition of critical pedagogy in adult education in the UK lends it institutional strength, whereas its isolation in US business schools and attendant separation from critical pedagogy in the field of education weakens it considerably. While we do not disagree—and shortly, will build on this point as we develop our case—we argue that exclusive attention to business schools reflects a selective (mis)read of critical management studies in the US context. Specifically, it sidesteps a US-based field of scholarship in which critical perspectives on both management and education thrive: communication studies. Perriton, for instance, finds a paucity of critical management theory and pedagogy in the US, observing that

The work of Cunliffe . . . in exploring social poetics and other dialogic practices is a relatively rare example of European theoretical traditions trumping the cultural bias toward centering management practice in the US by an academic based in the US, albeit moving there from the UK. Perhaps this represents nothing more than the exception proving the rule in respect of 'critical' management education approaches in the US. (Perriton, 2007: 79)

Such a sweeping depiction of the marginal status of continental and critical philosophy in US management studies overlooks prolific efforts in critical organization scholarship in the US field of communication. Though Perriton mentions Stanley Deetz among a handful of CMS authors employed in US business schools, she understandably misses how many US-based CMS scholars, such as Deetz (e.g. 1992a) and Mumby (e.g. 1988), actually work from the home field of organizational communication, housed in departments of communication studies rather than schools of business. When communication studies as a disciplinary and institutional site enters the analysis, we believe there emerges significant cause for tempering common pessimism about CME in the US.

*Rereading the US Scene Through a Sharper Lens: Communication Studies as an Incubator for CME*

As critical organization scholars working from the largely US-based field of communication studies, we find ourselves in a strikingly different environment—historically, institutionally, materially, philosophically, and practically—than (critical) management scholars housed in US schools of business. The account we provide here emphasizes the texture and significance of this nuance for the purposes of CME. Specifically, we characterize communication studies as a site in which critical perspectives on management and education have found fertile ground in the US, respectively, in organizational and instructional communication studies (for more on this, see Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006).

In the US, the field of communication studies tends to be housed in colleges of humanities or arts and social sciences. Owing in part to this institutional location, as well as an enduring interest in meaningful opportunities for voice and participation, communication studies has long been influenced by continental philosophy and critical theory. Today, communication as a discipline is generally premised on the claim that language, discourse, and interaction constitute social realities; and our graduate *and* undergraduate students become early and deeply acquainted with the implications of this view. Critical approaches to communication have permeated the discipline, thriving in traditional areas such as rhetorical

studies and media studies, while making inroads into conventional social scientific strongholds like organizational, interpersonal, and instructional communication.

The subfield of *organizational communication* has a particular stake in critical theories, stemming mostly from its intra-disciplinary history (Ashcraft, 2002). Initially, organizational communication was cast as an applied spawn of interpersonal communication and a close relative of business communication—hence, as a suspiciously atheoretical enterprise that threatened the insecure academic identity of a young communication discipline. Early on, the budding organizational communication community developed collective apprehension about its scholarly status. Explicit efforts to stress theoretical development and to distance itself from the bias of business management and the stigma of a skills orientation helped to define the origins of the subfield, cultivating an emerging space for critique of research serving managerial interests. These features were institutionalized by the Alta conferences<sup>1</sup> of the early 1980s and the associated explosion of interpretive and critical perspectives on organizational communication (Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983). The relative lack of agendas and imperatives defined by the US business world further minimized practical tensions incurred by the rise of critical perspectives, enabling a disciplinary climate wherein corporate and managerialist ideologies have a relatively light hold and critiques thereof find traction—not only among communication researchers, but also in our classrooms. While keenly interested in management, organizational communication students tend to engage learning from a deeper background in the humanities and critical philosophy than students in schools of business. And so, while the study of organizational communication continues to entail post-positivist social scientific approaches, humanistic, critical, and poststructuralist traditions simultaneously flourish (Corman and Poole, 2000). Critically inclined research enjoys comfortable status, with a strong presence in our lead journals, celebrated anthologies, top conference sessions, and graduate and undergraduate texts. Indeed, CMS scholars would be hard-pressed to claim marginal status in the context of organizational communication studies.

Conditions differ somewhat for critical pedagogy in the communication discipline, which concentrates attention to educational matters in two closely related sub-areas of inquiry: (1) communication education, geared mostly to communication classrooms and so, less pertinent to CME than (2) *instructional communication*, which emphasizes interaction patterns that traverse all educational settings. Whereas critical approaches are now embraced and even regarded as mainstream in organizational communication studies, they remain comparatively marginal yet growing in instructional communication scholarship. In the early 1990s, scholars began to invoke critical pedagogical theory to interrogate the interests and aims of traditional instructional communication scholarship, confronting assumptions regarding knowledge and curriculum construction, teacher-student relationships, and language and power in teaching and learning (Sprague, 1993). Despite resistance, critical pedagogy has clearly begun to take root in the communication discipline (see Fassett and Warren, 2007).

We offer this abridged backdrop to clarify our references to organizational and instructional communication studies, as well as to mark the increasingly prominent place of critical perspectives in the communication discipline, thereby



distinguishing our situation from most US business schools. We realize that organizational communication, when recognized at all, tends to appear as something of an oddity to external eyes. Many of our US colleagues housed in business schools presume that organizational communication is akin to business communication, more concerned with skill than theoretical development. Meanwhile, many CMS colleagues in the UK, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia express surprise upon encountering organizational communication scholars, having heard that discursive and critical approaches teeter on the margins of US management studies (Ashcraft, 2006). By redressing such misconceptions, our depiction is meant to underscore that the US affords spaces and ways in which to research and teach management beyond those found in business schools, and that the disciplinary context of organizational communication studies presents a particularly useful aberration for two main reasons: First, organizational communication lacks most of the institutional and ideological impediments to CMS and CME found in US schools of business (e.g. corporate-driven executive education programs and development initiatives). Instead, it operates in surroundings that generally foster critical scholarship and critically minded students; indeed, critical and feminist studies are among its most prominent areas of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Second, organizational communication is situated nearby a sister subfield, instructional communication, which increasingly examines educational interaction through the lens of critical pedagogy.

In these ways, communication studies provides precisely the sort of institutional home (or transitional housing?) for which CME authors call in envisioning a more substantial US branch of CME. As noted earlier, for example, Perriton (2007) identifies the separation of CMS scholars in schools of business from their critical pedagogy counterparts in schools of education as a major factor in the stunted growth of CME in the US. The field of communication studies redresses this problem, as critical organizational and instructional scholars conduct their labor side by side in the same academic unit (i.e. university departments or schools of communication), while also belonging to the same professional associations and attending the same regional, national and international conferences.

In sum, we propose communication studies as a promising disciplinary ally and incubator for CME in the US. Cultivating this relationship will require work on both sides. For CMS and CME scholars outside the communication field and/or beyond the US, it will necessitate systematic exposure to and exchange with critical organizational communication scholarship, sometimes published in management and organization studies volumes but more often appearing in disciplinary outlets and anthologies.<sup>3</sup> Of US critical communication scholars, facilitating CME will require not only more interdisciplinary and international exchange, but also development and strengthening of intra-disciplinary networks. Currently, for example, the relation of organizational and instructional communication studies can be characterized as sporadic at best. It is often as if the former surrenders the study of educational settings to the latter, whereas the latter relinquish organizational dimensions to the former. The current division of foci and irregularity of exchange makes little sense from the avowed vantage points of either subfield, except for balkanizing tendencies that have 'disciplined' our eyes away from evident sources of alliance. CME provides a ready rationale to bridge these areas by reminding us that institutions of higher education are

political sites of labor and that institutional dynamics shape educational interaction. In this sense, CME stands to enrich communication studies, supplying a compelling motive and supporting literature for enhancing interchange between communication subfields.

To be clear, then, we do *not* mean to propose a one-way relationship wherein communication studies somehow enlightens CME. On the contrary, it is because we see ‘disciplined’ blind spots in both CME and communication studies that we believe their alliance could be of mutual benefit. Thus far, we have offered a finer-grained reading of CMS in the US context, identifying communication studies as an alternative site where critical perspectives on management and education have already begun to flourish alongside one another. Specifically, we proposed that cynicism about the potential of CME in the US might be mitigated by utilizing the communication discipline as an incubator—a political and institutional strategy for finding a stronger, more radical footing in the US. As we turn next to a second, seemingly unrelated tendency in the CME literature—minimal self-reflexivity about the construction of pedagogical figures and relations—we consider how communication studies can also support CME in promoting self-consciousness about the embodied politics of difference.

### **Critical Reflexivity at Home: Communication Studies and Embodied Relations of Difference**

#### *Politicizing CME Participants: Difference Submerged in Disembodied Abstraction*

On the whole, CME scholarship has accentuated the analysis and transformation of conventional management education; fewer works critique the critics, especially from within. While this is not generally surprising (i.e. reflexivity is a challenging and multi-layered enterprise for all scholars), CME and especially CMS appear somewhat less prone to self-reflexivity when compared with other critical endeavors. For example, Perriton and Reynolds (2004) argue that reflexivity about internal politics has found less traction in CME than in the larger critical pedagogy literature. Specifically, they wonder why CME scarcely engaged the debates following Ellsworth’s (1989) provocative challenge to dynamics of gender, race, and sexuality embedded in critical pedagogy. Ellsworth (1992) argues that ‘key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, “empowerment”, “student voice”, “dialogue”, and even the term “critical”—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination’ and ironically reproduce the very patterns critical pedagogy seeks to upend, such as ‘Euro-centrism, racism, sexism, classism, and “banking education”’ (p. 91). Demystifying the critical pedagogue who magically steps out of ideology to dismantle it, Ellsworth reminds us that all teachers and students inhabit bodies variously invested in the systems of identity and power they seek to resist. Hence, critical pedagogy is an inevitably partial and contradictory endeavor demanding constant reflexivity and humility, and meaningful ‘communication across differences’, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, is only possible when teachers surrender their superior purchase on liberation through rational dialogue in favor of a ‘pedagogy of the unknowable’, distinguished by a vulnerable posture:

If you can talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and 'the Right thing to do' will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and reshaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive. (Ellsworth, 1992: 115)

Perriton and Reynolds (2004) contend that, whereas many CME scholars cite Ellsworth's essay, few take up with the substance of her claims about difference politics in the classroom and associated tensions internal to critical pedagogy. Instead, CME continues to reflect the heavy influence of Freirian traditions, generally minimizing the impact of feminist and other gender- and race-conscious approaches. Despite several worthy efforts in self-reflexivity (e.g. Reedy, 2008; Sinclair, 1997; Swan, 2005), notions now contested in the broader critical pedagogy community survive mostly unscathed in CME, such as faith in the critical pedagogue who rouses student consciousness and choice through ostensibly neutral forms of dialogue. For CME, empowering critical reflection remains 'a process guided, facilitated and assessed in some form by a critically "aware" teacher supported by a myriad of texts' (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004: 67). In much of the CME literature, this teacher-liberator continues to appear abstract and disembodied, devoid of a particular physicality and identity, especially vis-à-vis gender, race, and sexuality. This pattern tends to hold true even in cases where authors are writing from their own experience (e.g. Cavanaugh and Prasad, 1996; Grey et al., 1996): Personal classroom encounters are rarely processed through a lens attuned to the embodied politics of difference, and recommendations are typically offered to a 'standard' critical teacher, the details of whose body presumably will not interfere with the 'universal' techniques of critical dialogue (for something of an exception, see Fulop, 2002). Arguably, then, Ellsworth's original criticism is still germane to the current CME conversation:

When educational researchers writing about critical pedagogy fail to examine the implications of the gendered, raced, and classed teacher and student for the theory of critical pedagogy, they reproduce, by default, the category of generic 'critical teacher'—a specific form of the generic human that underlies classical liberal thought. (Ellsworth, 1992: 102)

In response to this persistent tendency in CME, Perriton and Reynolds (2004) adapt Ellsworth's 'pedagogy of the unknowable' to the context of management pedagogy, conceptualizing critical management teachers and students as 'colonizers who refuse'—at once exploitative and revolutionary, invested in and resistant to oppressive formations. Productively, they caution against an overly individualistic reading of this subject position; and as a helpful guide in avoiding that risk, they urge CME scholars to more carefully integrate gender-conscious scholarship, particularly feminist accounts of men and women's participation in hegemonic gender relations.

Although we concur with the spirit of their suggestion—namely, its focus on the relevance of difference to CME and the contradictory yet hopeful character of critical management pedagogy—we also find that it minimizes at least two vital aspects of Ellsworth's (1989) original analysis. First, as Perriton and Reynolds'

(2004) argument unfolds, it shifts from awareness of multiple dimensions of difference to an emphasis on gender and feminist theory. In contrast, Ellsworth's perspective underscored *intersectionality*, or the inevitable entanglement and interdependence among multiple and shifting identities (not only gender, but race, sexuality, class, and so on). Second, Perriton and Reynolds' (2004) adaptation of a 'pedagogy of refusal' mostly retains the abstract, disembodied quality of CME's generic critique (2004: 72). Still sidelined, then, is sensitivity to (a) multiple, simultaneous forms of colonization and (b) their embodied, situational manifestation and variation, captured by Ellsworth's emphasis on 'communication across differences' (Ellsworth, 1989: 115). In other words, the colonizer–revolutionary tension plays out on many fronts at once, as CME participants with particular bodily and identity investments seek to enact teaching and learning praxis amid the specific demands of everyday interaction. It is perhaps not widely known among CME scholars that Ellsworth received her scholarly training in the context of US communication studies. Returning to that context, we demonstrate next how critical communication theory can assist in restoring her focus on dynamic, embodied intersectionality to Perriton and Reynolds' (2004) fruitful challenge to CME.

*Power Relations as Embodied Interaction: A Communication Model of Organizing Difference*

A truism among communication scholars holds that human interaction is a constitutive process. This phrase counters popular views of communication as transmission, or the expression of already formulated ideas and feelings. Communication scholars theorize communication as an ongoing, interactive, and generative process that gives rise to, rather than merely conveying, individual and social possibilities. Organizational communication scholars in particular often insist that communication activates the very notion, lived experience, and material artifacts of organization (Deetz, 1992a; Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). Put simply, communication is not one among many pertinent variables but rather is *the* organizing process that brings institutions to life.

Organization structure and practice have long been theorized as emergent within a relationship of mutual vulnerability. For example, early organization theorists acknowledged a gap between formal structures and actual conduct. Rising interest in the social construction of reality set a friendly intellectual climate for analyzing organization as an ongoing accomplishment (e.g. Weick, 1979). And various accounts of the agency–structure relation depicted official systems as (in)variably incomplete and conflicted, susceptible to the interpretation and improvisation of people as they act back on systems through their everyday activities.<sup>4</sup> Such developments, however, tend to obscure the organizing function of communication *per se*.

In contrast, scholarship on the 'communicative constitution of organization' endeavors to explain how organization 'might be generated by communication out of the circumstances of a local interaction' (Cooren and Taylor, 1997: 220). This view entails a dialectical relation between two claims about the structuring properties of language. (1) Organization emerges in *conversation*, defined as the ongoing activity of coorienting, wherein two or more actors negotiate their

relation to something (Taylor, 1993; Taylor et al., 1996). Simultaneously, (2) organization is *text*, or a shared system of coorientations, emerging from a history of coorienting, which shapes possibilities for current conversation. In this light, we might understand dynamic classroom interaction as *conversation* in which actors attempt to coorient toward a subject, guided by the *text* generated from a rich legacy of performing educational roles and practices, which becomes institutionalized in material objects and artifacts that can also transcend time and space, like textbooks and physical space configurations. In other words, organization is a communication effect—‘a fiction supported, to be sure, by many facts’—produced by the constant interplay of *conversation* and *text* (Cooren and Taylor, 1997: 254).

Critical approaches to organizational and instructional communication share key assumptions concerning power. For instance, as the fundamental organizing process, communication is the central mechanism through which relations of power become organized, dismantled, and reconstituted. Accordingly, the interactive struggle over meaning—the ongoing dialectic of text and conversation explained earlier (Taylor, 1999)—is a crucial site of control and resistance, wherein interests take local shape and collide (e.g. Deetz and Mumby, 1990). The struggle is always enacted by people with specific physicality and perspective, vested in certain ways and means of being, living, and representing. Yet the social and material resources and limitations aligned with particular bodies and identities are never fixed; rather, these are negotiable to varying degrees in different situations. Communication in this sense refers to the embodied, contextual, and always contested/contestable processes of creating, renewing, and transforming systems of meaning, relationships, identity, and thus power (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004).

As this suggests, treating communication as constitutive of power means appreciating communication as consequential because it generates and mediates our knowledge of and relation to physical, economic, and institutional conditions (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004). Rather than prioritize symbolic over material realities, we aim to understand the intricate relations between them. That is, critical communication scholars probe the politics of ordinary organizational interaction (i.e. *conversation*) because they believe such interaction *creates* the ‘real life’ outcomes (i.e. *text*) it appears to ‘merely’ talk about.

Moreover, critical communication scholars increasingly treat power relations not in abstract or generic terms, nor simply in terms of class and hierarchical positions and interests, but also in terms of concurrent identities like race, gender, sexuality, and ability. This development supplants unidimensional conceptions of identity and power with a focus on relations of difference/sameness, or connections among the numerous identities we inhabit (e.g. Alexander, 1999; Allen, 2004; Cooks, 2003; Johnson and Bhatt, 2003). It asserts that most people simultaneously embody identities associated with privilege *and* oppression; accordingly, it asks how these collide in dynamic interaction and with what context-specific forms and consequences. Writing in critical communication pedagogy, for example, Sprague (1993: 17) asserts that classroom interaction ‘cannot be considered as the result of conscious cognitive choices without regard for the interplay of factors like class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness that shape each encounter’.

The communication model of organizing power and identity described here is conducive to CME for a few reasons. First, it brings flesh and motion to Perriton and Reynolds' (2004) call for CME scholars to examine their own political relations as colonizers who refuse. Rather than settling on class, gender, or any other identity aspect as primary in the abstract, it restores Ellsworth's (1989) original emphasis on 'communication across differences', or the intersectionality of identities as embodied in dynamic interaction. Second, the communication model offered here is compatible with discursive perspectives already alive and well in the CMS and CME literatures. In light of such shared (meta)theoretical ground, communication studies becomes all the more sensible as an incubator for CME in the US. Add to this the aforementioned claim that critical communication scholarship is already gravitating toward intersectional analyses—a direction for which CME scholars are calling—and it would seem we have the makings of an important alliance that can foment reflexivity on relations of difference, particularly as represented in CME scholarship and enacted among CME participants.

It is here that the two main sections of the essay come together in argument: Communication studies can be a productive ally for CME in the US not only for strategic institutional reasons, but also because it promises content compatibility and development in the theory and praxis of critical management pedagogy. As we turn toward conclusion, we offer two examples of tangible future projects that begin to cultivate a multi-dimensional relationship—at once institutional, political, practical, and theoretical—between CME and communication studies by drawing on the aforementioned dialectic of text and conversation.

### **Artifact-agents: Exploring Difference in Critical Management Textbooks**

In the communication model described earlier, organizational artifacts 'materialize' the *text* of organizing because they encapsulate a history of coorienting (i.e. how actors have related to something in the past) and carry that legacy across time and space. In this view, artifacts are agents: permeated with the *text* produced by previous interactions yet capable of transcending those instances, they guide *conversation*, like 'scripts' linking local to global practice (Cooren and Taylor, 1997). In the context of educational research, Mehan's (1993) work on the social construction of learning disability offers a provocative example. He traces how 'text' in a more literal sense (e.g. organizational records like meeting minutes and testing scores)—once the subject of intense negotiation—become sedimented as taken-for-granted facts that delimit options for future interaction. Mehan demonstrates how voices backed by textual support (e.g. psychologists) come to dominate decision-making, eventually drowning out those most intimate with the student in question (e.g. teachers and parents).

We propose applying this notion of textual artifacts as agents (e.g. Brummans, 2007) to CME, specifically, by studying critical management textbooks as *text* in the sense theorized earlier. From a critical communication perspective, textbooks chart a path for coorienting to a subject. They are technologies that guide teachers and students by representing, re/producing, and disciplining the 'bodies of knowledge' (think both senses of the term) that count in management theory

and practice. Textbooks merit particular attention due to their pivotal yet often inconspicuous political role in structuring management teaching and learning. Consider, for example, the common practice of organizing syllabi, course content, classroom activities, examinations, and so forth around a textbook and its companion instructor's manual. As many have noted, textbooks 'define the legitimacy of topic areas and mirror the field's research priorities' (Litvin, 1997: 189). They 'discipline' students into the field's key interests while acculturating teachers who use them; they supply 'prisms through which to "read" a scholarly field, for they refract its tacit assumptions (Agger, 1991: 106). Critical readings of such texts thus enable 'a radical rethinking of the role we play in articulating accounts of organizational life' (Mumby, 1993: 21).

We underscore here the structuring function of messages implied by textbook content and organization. In a previous attempt at reflexivity on constructions of difference (Ashcraft and Allen, 2003), we identified subtle representations of race within several highly regarded and widely circulating organizational communication textbooks. Our analysis traced how these works function to preserve inequitable race and labor relations, normalizing spaces, bodies, interests, values, notions of self, and norms of interaction associated with whiteness. Since then, we have begun to observe anecdotally how other textbooks on management and organization call attention to relations of power. Supporting examples, for instance, are often cast in terms of individual, class (i.e. broadly conceived, as in 'managers vs. workers'), gender (highlighting concerns associated with fairly privileged white women), *or* intercultural (and typically, international) differences. Such an approach tends to eclipse intersectionality by isolating identity categories; erasing links among simultaneous roles, memberships, and selves; and neglecting how multiple forms of privilege and oppression are simultaneously embodied. Additionally, many textbook discussions of power are situated in professional or 'white-collar' contexts. Although this is not surprising given the focus on management, it is worth noting the striking absence of academic institutions as illustrative sites. Teachers and students are often invited to see relations of power as occurring in organizations 'out there' rather than as a phenomenon negotiated 'in here, right now, real time'. The operation of power most immediate to teaching and learning experiences—in the work/place of management education—is thereby sidestepped.

Our initial effort yielded concrete suggestions for rewriting organizational communication textbooks. Toward facilitating a parallel kind of 'textual praxis' in CME, we propose systematic analysis of how and where critical management textbooks represent embodied relations of difference. Such analyses can provoke collective reflexivity while helping us to envision textbooks otherwise—not only as products of embodied scholarly labor, but also as agents that can guide us in breaking silence about the politics of intersectionality manifest in management pedagogy. CME scholars have already been instrumental in producing critical management texts (e.g. Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006; Knights and Willmott, 2007; Linstead et al., 2004; Thompson and McHugh, 2002); and some have initiated public reflection on the process (e.g. Fulop, 2002). We propose utilizing a critical communication model to further politicize that reflection by examining how relations of difference are embedded in our own textbooks. Next, as we consider

a second and final example that could nurture the CME–communication relationship, we shift from a focus on *text* toward *conversation*.

### **‘Constructive’ Conversation: Engaging Intersectionality in the Classroom**

Our second example turns to the hearth of home in higher education: the classroom. As noted earlier, a communication model of organizing power and identity takes *conversation* (i.e. the ongoing activity of coorienting) as a consequential site of creation and possibility. In *conversation*, actors embody and negotiate a complex composite of salient social identities (gender, race, class, ability, age, and sexuality, as well as professional roles and disciplinary identities), which variously invoke degrees of privilege and oppression (Allen, 2004). As a form of organizing *conversation*, classroom interaction can be complicit in maintaining the status quo, and it can elicit educational reform as well as challenge power relations in organizations beyond higher education. We propose employing this communication model to study classroom interaction in CME courses, with particular attention to embodied relations of difference. Such analyses can provoke collective self-reflexivity while helping us to envision and enact classrooms as spaces where all members actively interrogate and reconstruct power dynamics. In this way, we might also develop praxis for comparable *conversation* in other organizational contexts, within and beyond higher education, thereby serving the larger transformative aims of CME.

As noted earlier, critical instructional communication scholarship advocates a dialogic, reflexive approach to teaching and learning, in which participants collaborate with one another not only to critique and transform educational practices, but also to discover how the vocabularies they use and the ways they communicate influence their ability to do so. In other words, a critical communication approach to the classroom considers how language and forms of interaction proactively re/construct teaching and learning environments. The goal, of course, is to facilitate classrooms that are sites of resistance and empowerment, and to acquire critical perspectives and skills that can translate into other organizational contexts as well. From a communication perspective, transformative classroom *conversation* would conscientiously refer to knowledge about power dynamics—not in the abstract, but as embodied right then and there, as the politics of teacher–student roles and relations collide with other dimensions of difference in an intricate dance. Toward realizing this vision of CME classrooms, we can begin by studying current classroom interaction.

By stressing the constitutive role of communication, and by probing the relationship between symbolism and materiality, a critical communication approach assists exploration of how CME classroom participants activate power dynamics in discourse. Such an approach responds to and complicates the criticism that CME ‘lacks reflexivity with regard to issues of identity and politics in the classroom’ (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004: 69), while also reinforcing Ellsworth’s (1989) ‘pedagogy of the unknowable’, as well as other calls in CME for self-reflexivity and vulnerability on the part of students *and* teachers. The sort of research proposed here would invite participants to practice self-reflexivity regarding, for



instance, (a) how the politics of teacher–student relations intersect with multiple dimensions of embodied difference in real-time interaction; (b) how reciprocity and resistance are embedded in power relations (e.g. diverse student resources for influencing teachers); (c) how bases of privilege and oppression shift in relation to context; (d) how pressures and mechanisms ‘external’ to the classroom (e.g. departmental policies, disciplinary norms, dominant cultural ideologies) shape interaction within it; (e) how classroom *conversation* is produced by and produces the *text* of education; and other political complexities constituted in communication.

To implement such studies, we envision research teams composed of CME and critical communication scholars drawing on the rich literatures of both fields to develop specific projects. Such collaborative projects promise positive and even radical developments in CME pedagogy, theory, and research. Findings could help critical management educators become more aware of how they are ‘always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change’ (Ellsworth, 1989: 101). And as CME educators strive to transform classrooms—their own and others—along these lines, they can re-socialize not only themselves and future managers, but also future CME educators. In addition to building interdisciplinary CME theory, these collaborative projects can generate materials for critical textbooks on management and organizational communication, while also informing curricular development. As such, reflexive research on the politics of difference in CME classroom *conversation* can enact critical pedagogy’s commitment to transformative praxis.

## Conclusion

Through a rereading of CME in the US national context, followed by a closer inspection of relations of difference as constituted in CME, we have endeavored to bring politics ‘even closer to home’ in two respects: (1) home as location, at the meeting of geographical, disciplinary, and institutional spaces and identities; and (2) home as self-reflexivity, especially on the politics of difference *within* critical management studies and pedagogy. We have argued that the field of communication studies yields a fertile environment for CME in the US for two main reasons: Communication studies (1) provides a feasible institutional incubator wherein critical studies in management and pedagogy are already structurally integrated and (2) offers a supportive community trained in confronting the embodied politics of difference. As such, it is our contention not only that institutional alliance between CME and communication studies can create a strategic US foothold for CME, but also that proximity can beget vital developments in the theory and praxis of CME. To illustrate resulting possibilities, we drew on a communication model of organizing to offer specific recommendations that pursue Perriton and Reynolds’ (2004) important reflexive challenge to CME while honoring Ellsworth’s (1989) original focus on ‘communication across differences’.

Simultaneously, we have argued that CME can assist communication studies with a strong rationale and supporting literature from which to build a closer relationship

between organizational communication and instructional communication—subfields that have yet to articulate and maximize shared interests. As critical organizational communication scholars, we are excited about the prospect of forging ties between CME and communication studies, for these can enhance our interdisciplinary alliances with CMS and our intra-disciplinary connections with instructional communication colleagues, thereby enriching critical communication scholarship and programs. With this essay, we hope to stimulate a similar sense of possibility within and beyond communication studies.

Ultimately, our intent is to bring the politics of difference ‘at work’ in ordinary interaction closer to home for all of us. To be sure, no one gets off the hook when relations of power are no longer comfortably removed as something awaiting people ‘out there’ in the ‘real’ work world. But we believe it is on the hook—when we are compelled to consider how we organize power and identity through our own embodied labor of teaching and learning about them—that tangible possibilities for change within our reach begin to emerge.

## Notes

1. In the early 1980s, several communication and management scholars began to gather annually in Alta, Utah to discuss alternatives to functionalist and managerialist approaches. Out of these conversations grew a landmark volume (Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983), which quickly became a pivotal early reference for studying organization from a communication perspective.
2. See, for instance SAGE’s *New Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Jablin and Putnam, (2004) and *Organizational Communication* (Putnam and Krone, 2006).
3. For example, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Theory*, and *Journal of Applied Communication*.
4. For example, Barley and Tolbert (1997); Boden (1994); Feldman (2000); Van de Ven and Poole (1995).

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