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A rhizomatous metaphor for dialogic theory

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ABSTRACT

Communication shapes both reality and thought. Communication is also influenced by the metaphors and paradigms that individuals and groups adhere to. This essay describes an alternative, dialogic, metaphor of public relations as a rhizome, or non-linear model of knowledge, communication, and culture. The rhizome is described in contradistinction to the more common arboreal or tree metaphor found throughout Western culture, as a means of changing how students and professionals reify public relations practice. The essay calls for educators to tend to the development of the rhizome by modeling the conduct of compassionate and empathetic interactions in the classroom, and contingent, negotiated, dialogic, knowledge and beliefs.

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1. Introduction

In 1987, [Deleuze and Guattari \(1993\)](#) wrote a significant postmodern text, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. One of the most influential chapters was titled “Rhizome,” introduced as a metaphor for knowledge or understanding. Rhizomes consist of nodes or points of connection linked by rootstalk that do not follow arborescent patterns of growth. [Deleuze and Guattari \(1993\)](#) described how, like a rhizome, culture and knowledge spread through “ceaselessly establishe[d] connections” (p. 7) rather than via fixed points of interaction, a metaphor that resonates well with public relations.

The rhizome is discussed here as a model or metaphor for public relations. To now, scholars have focused their attention on what is above the surface: posing questions about whether this or that website was dialogic, or how dialogic some technology like social media appear. In other words, we have looked at the outcomes of dialogue in public relations, the parts that are publicly visible (above the ground); and we have treated dialogue cybernetically rather than organically. The real story with dialogue, as in the case with a rhizome, is what is happening on (or in) the ground, via the assumptions and paradigms held by professionals.

For dialogue to play a larger role in public relations as we move forward, dialogue needs to be more invasive, more rhizomatous, taught to undergraduates and young professionals, and modeled as a means for achieving more effective organization–public relationships. The mistake that many make is treating dialogue as a tool for persuasion in mass communication. Although persuasion and dialogue can coexist, as [Theunissen \(2015\)](#) has argued convincingly, dialogue itself is an interpersonal rather than a mass phenomenon. Dialogue should represent one theoretical tool among many in the arsenal of the professional communicator, but the skills related to developing dialogic virtuosity (cf., [Pearce & Pearce, 2000](#); [Pieczka, 2011](#)) transcend many situations, and, as argued below, will lead to a stronger profession.

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This essay is divided into four sections. The first section conducts a review of the classic literature on dialogic communication, drawing attention to the diversity and similarity of views. The second section reviews recent dialogic public relations scholarship, identifies the models of dialogic communication present, and contrasts contemporary practice with classic theories and approaches. The third section presents an alternative metaphor of dialogic communication as a rhizome, contrasting it with the arboreal analogy so often used in extant literature. Section four concludes the paper by discussing the implications of the rhizomatous metaphor for the teaching of public relations. Specifically, this new metaphor for public relations requires changes in public relations education that move us away from quantitative studies toward more humanistic, critical, rhetorical, models.

2. A review of the classic dialogic literature

Understanding the basic assumptions of a theory is the first step toward using that theory effectively. On the most basic level, the theory of dialogue is about talking with people and forming relationships. Dialogue is *not* about posting messages for mass audiences to read, engaging in symbolic rhetorical activities designed to assist marketing or advertising, or communicating with individuals and publics with the intent of persuasion.

As Kent and Taylor (1998) argued, dialogue is a relational orientation: “dialogic communication refers to a particular type of relational interaction—one in which a relationship exists. Dialogue is product rather than process” (p. 323). In other words, in the vocabulary of systems theory, dialogue is more than the sum of its parts, and more than just a set of rules (wholeness and nonsummativity) (cf., Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). However, Kent and Taylor’s use of the term “interaction” also implies a mechanistic, functionalistic approach, and a hint of cybernation, which is definitely not a part of genuine dialogue. True dialogue requires that interlocutors treat each other with respect, solicit feedback from others, and, importantly, be willing to be changed (Lane, 2014). As Heath explained, “To be successful, people need to know and willingly participate in dialogue. That requires trusting a system or process and one’s role in that process or system” (Heath et al., 2006, pp. 350–351).

Carey (1989) describes the dialogic process aptly with his transmission view and ritual view of communication distinction (p. 12). According to Carey, “The transmission view of communication is . . . defined by terms such as ‘imparting,’ ‘sending,’ ‘transmitting.’ . . . The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages. . . for the purpose of control” (p. 12). A transmission view of dialogue would be what is seen in the scholarship that examines dialogue in social media and tries to reduce dialogue to a two-way sharing of information, rather than a dialogic relationship (e.g., Bonsón & Flores, 2011; Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010; Smith, 2010), while the ritual view of communication fits more closely into the classic dialogic model of communication:

The ritual view of communication, is linked to terms such as “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” and “the possession of a common faith.” This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms. . . “communion,” “community,” and “communication.” A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. (Carey, 1989, p. 15)

What Carey describes is essentially an empirical view of two-way communication as strategic, informative, and repetitive, versus an ontological view of dialogue as experiential and relational.

Another important point worth noting is that dialogue cannot be quantified. Relational quality cannot be measured by the number of interactions between those involved, or the length of time over which they occur. Dialogue is a communicative process much like dialectic. However, unlike dialectic, which tries to arrive at objective truth through the Socratic method, dialogic truths are contingent and rooted in the lived experience of the conversational participants. No persuasion or radical agreement is to be expected—dialogue does not exist to solve organizational problems—but neither should dialogue be seen as impotent, unable to foster understanding or resolve differences of opinion. Rhetorical and interpersonal scholars have understood for almost a century that the mere act of coming together, of forging a common identity (Burke’s [1966] notion of consubstantiality), of identification with others and expressions of mutual empathy (cf., Burke, 1969b), lead to positive persuasive and relational outcomes.

2.1. *Classic theories of dialogue*

The theory and research on dialogue goes back almost a century to Martin Buber’s (1970/1923) seminal text *I and Thou*. Buber was one of the first relational philosophers to privilege the relationship over the individual. Buber believed that human interactions should be guided by a genuine concern for the other person. Human interaction should be guided by human kindness and not by manipulation. For Buber, presentness (propinquity) and acknowledgement of others was a prerequisite to interaction. As Buber (1970) explains in *I and Thou*, the present “exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being” (p. 63). Buber continues, explaining, “Presence is not what is evanescent and passes but what confronts us, waiting and enduring” (p. 64). What matters are the spaces between interactions, the presentness of encounters, and relations that exists in the betweenness of actual experience (Buber, *passim*).

Starting this section with Buber’s ideas is instructive because for Buber, genuineness and presence were not mediated states but points of human contact. Since most social media are public venues, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media

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