# Reconceptualizing teaching:
# Using CMM to change rules and relationships in the classroom

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### ABSTRACT

As a practical theory, CMM has been used extensively in therapy, consultation, and organizational settings—I want to add the "educational domain" to this list. Although there are many CMM concepts, tools, and models from which to choose, this essay focuses primarily on two macro-level concepts, the communication perspective and cosmopolitan communication, and applies them to the educational context. After reading this essay, it is my hope that the relevance of CMM in restructuring the classroom environment and enhancing learning will be clear and useful to educators and those interested in the educational process.

## An introductory story

When I was a graduate student over 20 years ago, I took two back-to-back seminars, Communication Education and Communication Theory. My experience at the time was that these courses had no disciplinary overlap (except the word "communication" in both titles), although I came to realize years later how closely connected they are. While the content in each course was quite different, both classes focused on epistemological issues or what we "know" about education and theory. In the Communication Education course, our time was spent learning about, for example, Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) of educational objectives and the research showing the importance of fostering "higher order learning," what the literature says about grading and how to do it "objectively," and the most recent studies done on the "teacher traits" that foster productive student-teacher relationships. Communication Theory focused on the three current, albeit, incommensurate perspectives of communication; Covering Laws (Berger, 1977) was the "taken for granted" theoretical perspective that any respectable researcher would use, while the two newer perspectives, a "rules" approach based on CMM (Pearce & Cronen, 1980), and a "human systems" approach (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1979) were, to put it mildly, dubious because they deviated from the "traditional scientific paradigm". When the semester was over, had you asked me what I learned I would have told you what the research says about how to effectively structure a college course and the traits students hope for in a teacher, or I would have described in vivid detail the debate raging in the area of communication theory. What I could not tell you was how these two courses were related, or, more specifically, how my newly acquired knowledge of CMM could revolutionize how we think about and "do" Communication Education. That would come later.

Since those days in graduate school some important shifts have taken place. In the area of Adult Education, we have more sophisticated and inclusive theories of learning and development

(Kegan, 1982, 1994; Gardner, 1983; Knowles, 1990; Goleman, 1995; Deloz, 1999; Merriam and Cafferella, 1999; Mezirow & Associates., 2000) which broaden the questions researchers and educators ask about what constitutes good teaching and learning in the classroom. With respect to Communication Theory, the discipline is now legitimating theoretical perspectives based on, for example, social constructionist paradigms; researchers and practitioners around the world are using practical theories like CMM, as this Special Issue attests.

Although the literature on adult development significantly advances our knowledge and understanding of adult learning and education, I have found the most useful and profound ideas to come from CMM. So how did CMM and Communication Education come to be, for me, inextricably linked?

To answer this I'd like to "fast forward" from graduate school to the year 1989. I had been teaching full-time at De Anza College for three years, my course load consisting of classes such as Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication, Fundamentals of Oral Communication, and Problem Solving and Critical Reasoning in Small Groups (although the content varied, the similarity across courses was the focus on skills development). I enjoyed every aspect of teaching, except one: grading! Unfortunately evaluating students seemed to undermine all of the other good things that were happening in the classroom. Naturally I was extremely frustrated, especially since all of my courses incorporated the latest research I had learned in my Communication Education seminar. I had interesting assignments based on higher order thinking, clearly laid out learning objectives, a grading scale based on precisely articulated criteria, and "traits' such as knowledge, openness, and friendliness that, according to the literature, students prized in a teacher. But these things didn't seem to matter: the bottom line for most of my students was their grade. If I were to lay out the "episodic structure" of these courses it would go something like this:

**Me (in conversation with students toward the beginning of the quarter):** The best way to learn is to stretch yourself and take risks. Don't be afraid to try new things… going to the edge of your knowledge and skills is where you'll change and grow…

**Students (toward the beginning of the quarter):** Ok, we're willing to try new things…as long as you make it safe for us.

(The first few weeks of the quarter consist of non-graded assignments to build trust and create a safe and open learning environment…)

**Students (right before the first graded assignment):** The assignment is clear, but tell us how hard you grade.

**Me:** Don't worry about the grade. You've got the grading criteria, so use it while you're doing the assignment. And then give it your all; be creative, have fun, and be willing to take risks.

**Students:** Just tell us what we need to do to get an "A." When it comes down to it, we just want to get an "A" in the class.

**Me:** Focus on your learning and your grade will follow.

**Students (after the assignment):** I'm 2 points away from an A. I did what you told me to do but I got a B. What did I do wrong and what can I do to make up the two points? I need an A in this class! (A few students fail the first assignment and, consequently, drop the course because they fear their final grade will be too low.)

**Me (by the end of the quarter):** It's clear that learning has become secondary; students are not taking risks and trying new things. It all seems to come down to their grade, and all the haggling about assignments they felt were unfairly graded (because they didn't get an A!) have left me exhausted and demoralized.

Regardless of the course, this episodic structure was fairly consistent. As I talked with my colleagues about my frustration, I discovered they had the same experience as well; it seemed to be an issue regardless of the teacher or the course! It was clear that grading students undercut a learning environment I wanted to create, but assigning grades was something that had to be done. So I drew the conclusion that this was a tension inherent in higher education and that the students and I would need to live with this. That is, until I began working with CMM…

In Spring quarter, 1989 I taught my first Communication Theory course using Pearce's book, *Communication and the Human Condition* (1989). The episodic structure I described above was consistent in the beginning of this course, with one significant difference; the class was small (6 students) and every student was interested in learning new ideas rather than receiving an "A". This created an engaging learning environment in which we pushed each other to the edge of our collective knowledge and experience. It was this class, and the ideas regarding CMM that we struggled with together, that changed my understanding and approach to teaching.

This essay is a meditation on, to re-paraphrase Bateson, "the *concepts* that make a difference." The title of this paper is "Reconceptualizing Teaching: Using CMM to Change Rules and Relationships in the Classroom." Although it's a mouthful, the title serves as a place marker that CMM is not an interesting conceptual theory with, unfortunately, little relevance to the hurly burly of daily life. Rather, CMM is a practical theory that provides scaffolding to enable, for example, educators to radically redefine how we think about teaching, evaluating, and relating with students. As aficionados of CMM know, there is no dearth of concepts and tools on which to draw. Some may even think of CMM as a "grab bag" of tools with some favorites (like the hierarchy model or strange loops) being pulled out of the bag over and over again. But, to mix metaphors, "not all concepts are created equal" and I believe two in particular are the "backbone" of CMM. The remainder of this essay will focus on these two macro-level concepts: taking a communication perspective and cosmopolitan communication. The other tools by which CMM has come to be identified (i.e., the hierarchy model, logical force, coordination and coherence, strange loops, the serpentine model) are best understood and used in the context of the communication perspective and cosmopolitan communication; they provide the means of making the concepts useful in practice.

### Taking a communication perspective

The Communication Perspective is an essential aspect of CMM, although the concept did not originate with this theory. Historically, language has been characterized as a mere tool whose sole function is the exchange of messages from one mind to another; good communication constitutes the clear and accurate transmission of ideas from a source to a receiver, as the Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication still popularly depicts (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). But during the past 50 years, a new paradigm of communication has emerged due, in large part, to a shift from foundationalism to social constructionism (i.e., Pearce, 1989; Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 1999; Penman, 2000).

Although the communication perspective has always been an important aspect of CMM, a shift in emphasis has occurred over the years. In the early development of CMM, the focus was on describing the performative and interpretive aspects of communication by asking the question, "how did these patterns get made?" In subsequent years CMM made the additional knowledge claim, based in part on the incorporation of a critical perspective and practitioner orientation, that some social worlds are better than others. Consequently, CMM's enhanced view of the communication perspective became an indispensable leverage for changing our social worlds by asking the additional question, "how can we make better patterns of communication?" In a paper intended to provide a brief introduction to CMM, Pearce (2001) begins with the communication perspective by describing three steps he has taken:

> "First, I found it useful to see organizations, families, persons, and nations as deeply textured clusters of persons-in-conversation… The second step in the communication perspective is the realization that the qualities of communication have fateful implications for the social worlds in which we live… The third step in the communication perspective is to see each new moment of communicating as a creative act in which we make something that had not existed before" (pp. 4-5).

To paraphrase Pearce, there are many things happening when persons are communicating—so much so that an emphasis on "transmitting messages" distorts the complexity of what is "being made" in the moment and what is "being elicited" in regard to the unfolding interaction. Communication is an activity that calls into being ways of seeing the world and relating to others; all the things that comprise our social worlds, such as emotions, personalities, schools, and governments are made in the patterns of communication in which we engage, and we are shaped by the characteristics of those patterns. So, "how" we talk is just as important as "what we say," because the way we talk invites ways of being and types of relationships that can range from open to hostile and from trusting to abusive.

As my first Communication Theory class wrestled with the implications of the communication perspective, they were struck by the significance of using this new lens as we looked at the current social issues such as abortion and affirmative action. We worked with transcripts and videotapes of people who represented opposite sides of an issue, focusing our attention of what was being "made" and "elicited" and what communicative patterns were developing as a result

of the interaction. The students then shifted to a more personal experience by identifying an unwanted repetitive pattern (Cronen, et al., 1979, call these patterns "URPs") in an interpersonal relationship and doing an analysis of how that pattern "got made" in the interaction or back and forth flow of the conversation.

Although I was conceptually aware at the time of the profundity of taking a communication perspective (one of my mantras over the years has been "everything changes" when we truly adopt this point of view), I was only using this lens to look at the larger social issues about which I cared and not personal questions such as, "What am I making in the classroom and in my relationship with students?" It was not until I asked my communication theory students in 1989 to apply the communication perspective to an interpersonal situation that I began to do the same.

Instead of asking the "traditional" questions I had been asking for years (i.e., Are my assignments useful? Are the grading criteria clear? Am I pushing students to higher-level thinking?) I used the lens of the communication perspective and asked these questions:

· How would I name the overarching patterns of interaction the students and I are making?

· What patterns do I want to make and elicit from the students in my classes?

· What am I making and eliciting by using a traditional method and style of teaching and grading?

· What are my stories about my role as teacher? What stories might the students have about my role as teacher and their role as students? How do these stories get expressed in the back and forth flow of our interactions?

I would like to reintroduce the pattern that occurred between my students and me that left us all frustrated. This time I will add commentary showing how I used a communication perspective and, within this perspective, other CMM tools as a lens to view the classroom environment we were creating.

**Me (in conversation with students toward the beginning of the quarter):** The best way to learn is to stretch yourself and take risks. Don't be afraid to try new things… going to the edge of your knowledge and skills is where you'll change and grow…

**Students (toward the beginning of the quarter):** Ok, we're willing to try new things…as long as you make it safe for us.

(The first few weeks of the quarter consist of non-graded assignments to build trust and create a safe and open learning environment…)

*Commentary*

Notice how a pattern is developing in which I'm inviting students into a different kind of learning situation; one in which they are asked to leave their comfort zone to try new things. Because of my teaching style and interpersonal connection with the students, they respond favorably to my offer with the proviso that I provide a "safety net" in case they fall. The support they need is

provided during the first few weeks of the quarter primarily because there are no grades attached to the things we are doing. This keeps me in the role of a "coach" and not that of "judge/critic." Using the concept of logical force and the "logic of meaning and action," (Pearce, 1989, p. 39 ff.) at this point in the quarter the implicative force is stronger than the contextual force as the students and I willingly participate in and co-construct a redefinition of our roles.

**Students (right before the first graded assignment):** The assignment is clear, but tell us how hard you grade.

**Me:** Don't worry about the grade. You've got the grading criteria, so use it while you're doing the assignment. And then give it your all; be creative, have fun, and be willing to take risks.

*Commentary*

It's at this point in the quarter that the context, and the stories we have about what is happening, begins to shift. The students recognize that, in the context of grading, taking risks and trying new things are not what they should do—especially in a skills oriented class where trying new things could prove disastrous. And for many of these students, getting good grades translates into qualifying for academic scholarships, transferring to a first-rate university, or getting a job promotion. Because of the goodwill that we have created in the first weeks of the quarter, they are upfront with me about their need for assurance that they won't be penalized for trying new things.

I have a different story about grading. The obsession with getting an "A" undermines the learning process by stifling curiosity, creativity, and the students' willingness to dance around the edges of what they don't know or cannot yet do. My role as teacher is to create the context where the "sheer joy of learning" can be experienced. When that happens, I believe students will place less centrality on the importance of their grade.

Using the hierarchy model, one way of naming the growing tension is the clearly different contexts from which we are operating. The highest level context for the students is their grade while, for me, grades are the lowest context and always in the higher context of learning. When the fissure over grades appears, the logical force shifts to contextual and remains this way for the rest of the quarter—we began acting like students and teachers ought to act!

Notice what is missing from my story: 1) the acknowledgement that once the grading begins, I am in an one-up position with respect to my students; 2) that my story about grades belies a cultural system in which Grade Point Averages (GPA's) are tied to self esteem, job placement and promotions, and university admittance; 3) that as long as I am part of a larger system in which high GPA's matter, I need to make a classroom situation in which students are not penalized for taking risks and trying new things. There is quite a discrepancy between my "told" stories about grades and the "lived" stories that most students experience.

**Students:** Just tell us what we need to do to get an "A." When it comes down to it, we just want to get an "A" in the class.

**Me:** Focus on your learning and your grade will follow.

### *Commentary*

Our different stories about learning, grading and our unequal power relationships continue to express themselves in our interaction. The students are asking me, as the dispenser of grades, to reassure them that I am not setting them up for failure and they can get an "A" on the assignment. I want to be their coach and not their critic, so I refuse to be put in the one-up position (but, of course, because I will be assigning grades I am in a more powerful position—the story told is not the story lived!). I try to change the context from grades to learning but, from their perspective, once we get into graded assignments, learning cannot be the highest context if it diminishes their chances of succeeding.

**Students (after the assignment):** I'm 2 points away from an A. I did what you told me to do but I got a B. What did I do wrong and what can I do to make up the two points? I need an A in this class! (A few students fail the first assignment and, consequently, drop the course because they fear that their final grade will be too low.)

**Me (by the end of the quarter):** It's clear that learning has become secondary; students are not taking risks and trying new things. It all comes down to their grade, and all the haggling about assignments they felt were unfairly graded (because they didn't get an A!) have left me exhausted and demoralized.

### *Commentary*

Without realizing it, my story about learning, grading, and what is possible in the classroom have made an unwanted pattern (a CMM URP) that reproduces itself with striking frequency. By taking a communication perspective I realize that, unintentionally, I have created a "crazy making" classroom environment. I start out as "coach" but switch to "judge" when I begin doling out grades; I encourage students to leave their comfort zone, only to attach an evaluation to their struggling; I tell them I am on their side and yet not everyone passes the class. These conflicting stories leave the students and me bewildered and confused.

From a third person perspective, this commentary may seem superficial and self-evident. But for me, as a professor enmeshed in a system I was trying to understand, taking the communication perspective was a liberating, "ah hah" experience. As long as I was asking the traditional questions about my teaching, I was looking only at assignments, grading, and the course structure. And consistently, I found the answers confirmed that I was doing what the communication education literature said was essential to good teaching. But once I began to ask the more profound question of what was "being made" in the construction of assignments, grading and my communicative patterns with students, I was able to name a crazy-making pattern of shifting contexts, mutually exclusive lived and told stories, and an unwavering contextual force once the evaluation of assignments began.

The communication perspective, along with other CMM tools and models, provides the scaffolding to ask the profound questions of what we are making and how unwanted

communicative patterns get remade and reified despite our best intentions. But if this line of questioning is to be more than just thought provoking vibrato, we must answer the follow-up question, "if not this pattern, than what?" This is where the second CMM concept, Cosmopolitan Communication, becomes indispensable.

## Cosmopolitan communication

The nature of reality is intrinsically and ultimately hidden from any finite exploration… Reality is ultimately problematical, not contingently so, for to grasp and formulate it, even as a set of questions, is to fragmentize it. The best we can hope to do is catch partisan glimpses…If we cannot hope ever to be perfectly right, we can perhaps find both enlightenment and refreshment by changing, from time to time, our ways of being wrong.

<div align="right">Wheelwright, 1962, pgs. 177-178</div>

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening.
To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency.
But the far more difficult achievement is that of seeing ourselves amongst others; as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken,
– a case among cases,
– a world among worlds.
Without this largeness of mind,
– objectivity is self-congratulation, and
– tolerance is a sham.

<div align="right">Geertz, 1983, pg. 16</div>

If there is one thing we can say with certainty about the information age, it's that information technology has provided an inescapable window (or doorway!) into the complexity of being human; we now know that there are infinite ways of living a life, constructing a community, and creating a story of what it means to be a person. Unfortunately, these ways of being human are bumping up against each other in ways never dreamed of a few hundred years ago. The daily news bombards us with the reality of ethnic, religious, tribal, community, national, and global conflicts due to the incommensurate stories we have about how to live on this planet that some of us call home. Like most of human history, it would not be problematic if we were primarily encapsulated in communities with similar "story lines" and only occasionally met a group we would characterize as "the other." But the information age has changed all of that. What hasn't changed (or changed enough!) is our tendency to treat those who are "not like us" as inferior, evil, or inhuman. The daily news is a cautionary tale of what happens when we reproduce patterns of good/bad (I'm good, you're bad) and right/wrong (I'm right, you're wrong) that have been such

a robust part of human history. The two quotes above remind us that all stories are partial, and that a largeness of mind and a healthy dose of humility are in order.

In this respect, CMM is both "timely" and "timeless" as the title, *Communication and the Human Condition,* suggests. Using the lens of the communication perspective (and the other CMM apparatus) enables us to name and understand the patterns of communication that call into being our social worlds and elicit particular ways of being human. Cosmopolitan communication names a particular pattern of communication that addresses our current situation of how to live together in the midst of incommensurate stories. Cosmopolitan communication is a way of being that acknowledges that, no matter how deeply believed or strongly asserted, all stories and perspectives are partial, and that these incomplete stories are none-the-less "real," and essential in constructing our lives. As Geertz reminds us, taking this perspective necessitates a "largeness of mind" that requires us to "see ourselves amongst others" and to remain in the tension while doing so. In *Communication and the Human Condition,* Pearce (1989) describes the performance demands of cosmopolitan communication:

> "…(1) "reading one's stories in such a way as to be deeply enmeshed in a local culture while being enmeshed in the largest possible system…(2) being committed to the task of achieving coordination among incommensurate systems; and, (3) being committed to the task of constructing the grounds for comparing what might seem to be incomparable systems " (pgs. 197-198).

Taking you back to my first Communication Theory class in 1989, my students were intrigued by cosmopolitan communication and the social worlds this way of being invites. They continued to work with the social and interpersonal issues that they analyzed when they took a communication perspective. But this time, I asked them to be "intervention agents" who would attempt to create the conditions for both parties to engage in cosmopolitan communication. How would they do this and what new and useful patterns might develop as they invited others to take a larger systemic perspective? I, too, used this as an opportunity to look at my own situation of teaching and learning in the classroom. I had named some important, albeit counterproductive and crazy-making, patterns that I wanted to change. But in his description of cosmopolitan communication, Pearce (1989) says that the performance demands are a lot easier to state than to put into practice and that doing so may require the wisdom of a sage, the patience of a saint, and the skills of a therapist. Since I am none of the above(!), I thought this would be a way of testing the feasibility of this perspective; can we successfully make new patterns of relating that are characterized by cosmopolitan communication where other well trod and robust patterns exist? It was a question I took seriously and hoped to answer affirmatively.

When I took a communication perspective, I was able to identify some robust stories that the students and I tell…and live. To restate the most obvious:

- ➢ **For students** – Learning is in the context of getting good grades.
- ➢ **For me** – Getting good grades is in the context of learning.
- ➢ **For students** – Grades are a fact of life that affect scholarships, university admittance,and

job promotions. As long as grades count, getting an "A" matters!

➢ **For me** – In the larger scheme of things, getting "A's" don't matter if you haven't learned to think, to be open to new ideas, to be curious…

➢ **For students** – A teacher will never be seen as primarily a "coach" and "facilitator" when grades are attached to assignments that assess the student's skill level. Instead, the teacher will be experienced as a "judge" or "critic."

➢ **For me** – I want to consistently be a "coach" for my students. I don't want the power base to shift when grading students begins.

To practice cosmopolitan communication, it is essential that I stay in the tension of these contradictory stories, by not attempting to fix, change, or minimize any or all of them. So, the first step was to enlarge my own perspective so as to create a frame that would enable these conflicting stories to live together. Here is the frame that I constructed:

• Grades are a fact of life as long as I'm teaching at De Anza College. I need to honor the tension of what grades mean to my students, the college, and the larger educational system of which we are a part.

• I do <u>not</u> want to reproduce the crazy making pattern I have now identified. I <u>do</u> want to create a pattern of relating to students in ways that keep me in the role of coach. I want the students and I to work well together and for them to know that I want them to succeed.

• I want to construct a grading system that gives students more control over their grade, while still making the grades a useful and meaningful indicator of student progress and achievement.

• I hope that if students have more control over their grade, they will be more open to the "joy of learning" and all that that entails.

Once I created this frame and named what I wanted to "make" with my students, I began to think of ways to implement this vision. It has been a process of trial and error over several years, and always in conversation with my students – But I did create a radically new system of grading. One major difference in this new system is that students do not get letter grades or points on individual assignments; instead they receive an "excellent," "pass," or "redo." The feedback they receive from me is based on how well they were able to accomplish the criteria for the assignment. For example, in my public speaking classes, students are delivering presentations to their classmates. Criteria for a particular assignment might include the student's ability to connect with the audience, to present clearly organized ideas, to integrate research and personal experience into the presentation, and to stay within the designated time frame. If the student skillfully incorporates these criteria into the presentation, s/he will receive an "excellent." If some things are missing but the presentation is "good enough," the student will receive a "pass." If the student misses the point or doesn't complete the assignment, s/he will be asked to redo it. If students receive a pass or a redo on the assignment, they can redo the assignment as many times as they need to without penalty, so as to master the skill set on which we are working. Knowing they can redo the assignment gives them the safety net they need to try new things, take risks, and discover things that they never would have, had they not had additional opportunities. Their

final grade is based on the number of excellents they have received throughout the quarter: Of the 9 assignments students do, they must receive 7 "excellents" for an "A," 5 "excellents" for a "B," and all "passes" for a "C."

As these changes have been made, our roles have been redefined—one way of naming this is that we all feel empowered. Students know that they can get the grade they want and they know what to do to get it. They are in the "drivers seat" so to speak. Staying with this metaphor, my new role is in the passenger's seat, coaching them on the joy of driving, the hazards of the road, and the sign posts of which to be mindful. The stories about what is possible in a college General Education course are new for both of us (not one of my students has experienced this type of grading and the ability to redo all assignments as many times as needed), and these new stories have redefined how we think of our "selves" as teachers and students (we are all both!) and how we relate to each other. As an aside, since I began this new system 8 years ago, I do not have students stressing, at least openly, about their grades, whining about their grades, hassling me about their grades…and, typically in any given quarter, only half of my students are receiving A's. I like to think that as they are empowered to choose their grade, the frenetic pull to get an A diminishes.

## Concluding thoughts

CMM has offered those of us committed to making better social worlds a rich and useful vocabulary (including a variety of tools and models) to use in infinite contexts and situations. In the context of teaching, I have found the communication perspective to be particularly useful in creating a lens to ask the penetrating questions about "what are we making?" and "of all of the things we could make how and why are we making this?" and cosmopolitan communication beckoning us to create those patterns of communication that help us stay in the tension of our differences while co-constructing ways forward. As I have struggled with and delighted in the use of CMM, I have come to believe that whether teaching CMM or living it, one need not be a saint or a sage…only a person willing to examine and retell the stories by which we live, and to remain open to the awe and mystery of it all!

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