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Scholars, Practitioners, and Dreamers of Better Social Worlds

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A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. (Confucius)

It is easy to resonate with this quotation attributed to Confucius, because our most significant personal and collective stories are about journeys of one sort or another. We all know that a journey, any journey, starts somewhere with a step or an action. We also know that how we punctuate the first step always is arbitrary because it is possible to designate any number of places as the beginning. We have mused and amused ourselves about where to begin the story of the Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC) and the program of applied communication research that emerged from that collaboration. We initially thought to begin with the day a small group of us met for the first time in 1995 to work together, but then we wondered about starting a bit later when, in 1997, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) recognized the PDC as a not-for-profit organization. Ultimately, we decided to begin the story long before the PDC was a gleam in anyone’s eye by describing the personal journeys of four academicians in the field of communication, whose passions to improve the quality of communication and to help make the world a better place were very much a part of the road on which they already were traveling.

Barnett Pearce began developing the theory of the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) as a young professor in the 1970s. That theory, and his subsequent career, has been devoted to understanding ways in which our social worlds are made in patterns of communication and how best to co-construct patterns that enable people with incommensurate social worlds to live together in peace.

His colleague and friend, Stephen Littlejohn, also was interested in conflict resolution and mediation. In the 1980s, Pearce and Littlejohn worked together on the Kaleidoscope Project at the University of Massachusetts (more about this shortly). Their work together on this project was the beginning of a series of convention presentations, coauthored articles, and a book about moral conflicts and the quality of public discourse (W. B. Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

Shawn Spano and Kim Pearce were graduate students during the early 1980s. They, too, were professionally and personally interested in CMM, moral conflicts, and the quality of public communication. They met in the early 1990s when Shawn was hired at San José State University (SJSU) and Kim was teaching just up the road at De Anza College.
Our common interests inspired the four of us to work together on a number of projects beginning in 1995. During that year, we partnered with other scholars and communication students, played with ideas, utilized CMM in the public domain, experimented with the Kaleidoscope model, and began developing models of our own. It was out of these ideals and commitments, and our sheer joy of working together, that the PDC eventually came to be.

Without naming it at the time, we also were embarking on a new journey of doing applied communication research. Cissna (2000, p. 170) described applied research as “intended for someone other than a community of scholars and includes in its conversation people who are not within the scholarly community,” and Frey (2000) said that applied communication research is, among other things, about scholars bringing their communication expertise and resources to bear to make a difference in people’s life (see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume). These descriptions easily could appear in a “PDC manifesto.”

Our story is a convergence of intellectual and social passions, and of rigor and artistry; it is about creating an organization for the purpose of, among other things, doing applied communication research. What follows is an “insider’s view” of our work.

Overview of the Public Dialogue Consortium and Its Relationship to Applied Communication Research

Without initially knowing it, what was to become the PDC began in 1995 when the four of us invited a group of communication professors, students, and practitioners to develop a Kaleidoscope project modeled on work done during the 1980s at the University of Massachusetts. Kaleidoscope originally was designed as an experiment in public discourse and an innovative attempt to create new patterns of communication for discussing difficult and controversial issues (see Carbaugh, Chen, Cobb, & Shailor, 1986; Leppington, 1995; Littlejohn, 1986; W. B. Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). A Kaleidoscope event consists of two or more disputants known to have opposing views on an issue, a moderator, a reflecting team, and a live audience. The role of the moderator and reflecting team is to prompt discussion through questions and observations that allow the disputants, and the audience, to examine the issue at hand from multiple points of view. The desired outcomes of a Kaleidoscope session include improved relationships among people who disagree passionately with each other, better understanding of how intelligent and thoughtful people can hold diametrically opposed views, and the opening of spaces for new understandings of the positions to which people are committed. The means to achieve these goals is a transformation of the pattern of communication to something more akin to dialogic communication rather than the more usual forms of debate and polarized conflict (see, e.g., Barge, 2002).

The first events that our newly formed group conducted were two campus Kaleidoscope sessions in Northern California, one at De Anza College on the topic of affirmative action and the other at SJSU on the topic of intercollegiate athletics. After extensive analysis of these events (Spano & Calcagno, 1996), we were sufficiently encouraged by our efforts to continue working together, but critical of the one-session, college-campus-only Kaleidoscope format. We set out to expand our repertoire and ways of working by attending training sessions sponsored by other practitioner groups, and by using what we learned to create a unique framework for connecting theory (CMM) to a range of communicative practices that we call “public dialogue.”

At this point, we decided to become a “bona fide” organization. We experimented with a number of names and eventually decided to call ourselves the “Public Dialogue Consortium.” One of our student members volunteered to prepare and file the paperwork
to become a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization; 6 months later, we were recognized by the IRS as an official organization. Simply put, our primary mission is to improve the quality and patterns of communication about the issues that matter to participants in organizations and communities.

A number of activities stand out as crucial to the early development of the PDC methodology. One was a 2-day international conference for dialogue practitioners that was sponsored, and largely funded, by the PDC. Participants included individuals and groups from Colombia, Argentina, Australia, and England, as well as from several places in the United States. The format consisted of a series of demonstrations by each of the participating practitioner groups, with ample time for reflection and critical analysis. It was a remarkable event that surfaced a rich variety of goals, methods, and approaches. Perhaps most important, the conference served as a source of comparison and inspiration for the PDC. We were able to draw from the methods we observed, adapting and integrating them into our approach, which, at the time, was still in its formative stages.

Another activity, really a series of activities, consisted of countless training sessions and simulations among members of the PDC. Typically, these sessions were framed around a particular skill, event design, or process design. For example, a few members of the PDC attended a National Issues Forum (NIF) training session (for information about the NIF, see its Web site: http://www.nifi.org; for communication research about NIF forums, see Gastil & Dillard, 1999a, 1999b; Harringer & McMillan, 2007, 2008; McMahan, 1985; Ryfe, 2006) and reported back to the group what they learned, and together, we discussed the assumptions, strengths, and limitations of that approach to deliberation and “choice work.” We then crafted an event design and role-play scenario in which we practiced deliberation skills and then carefully and critically analyzed our performance.

Our signature project, beginning in 1996 in the city of Cupertino, California, was a multiyear public dialogue process (Spano, 2001). We worked closely with the city manager, city council, local high schools and the schools’ superintendent, De Anza College (located in Cupertino), sheriff’s department, chamber of commerce, and local newspapers, among others, to create events that involved major stakeholders. We spent considerable time together mapping out different strategic processes, designing events, practicing facilitation skills, and reflecting on what we learned from working in the community. Prior to each public meeting, the PDC provided 2-day trainings for select high school students, college students from De Anza College and SJSU majoring in communication, and adults in the community to provide specific facilitation skills for the chosen event. (Our goal was to have a strong intergenerational presence in each public meeting.) We also invited city officials from other communities and communication colleagues from around the country to observe and critique various events; immediately after the public meeting, we met to listen to their observations. In addition, we regularly solicited feedback from participants, community leaders, and the facilitators. It was a highly productive learning environment, something akin to a postdoctoral research seminar with a strong applied focus.

The work in Cupertino launched us into several communities in the United States and beyond. Since our inception, we have been involved in over 30 projects with wide-ranging foci. We provide a sampling of the types of projects we have done by offering four brief examples and a more extended description of one. (For more information about PDC projects, methodologies, and ways of working, visit our Web site: www.publicdialogue.org.)

The Anne Frank Dialogue Project occurred in Albuquerque, New Mexico from January to June in 2000. The PDC designed a dialogue process for citizens interested in discussing historical and contemporary implications of the Holocaust. We developed a dialogue guide, which was mailed to 50 community members interested in hosting
dialogue groups in their homes, schools, churches, and workplaces. A culminating event occurred in May 2000 for community members interested in organizing action groups in their community.

Gear Up Waco was part of a 5-year program in which the PDC partnered with Baylor University and other educational institutions in McClennon County, Texas, to identify at-risk middle school students and track them toward higher education. Using Department of Education’s Gear Up funding, the PDC collaborated with other agencies to produce video projects; engage in parent, student, and teacher dialogues; start a parental leadership program; and mobilize community resources. We provided a pilot training program in conflict management for teachers in Brazos Middle School and designed and facilitated a daylong conference for agencies, titled “Creating Parent–Student Communities of Hope and Imagination.”

The town of Los Gatos, California, is a charming and sought-after bedroom community just northwest of San José. For the past 5 years, the PDC has worked with the town council, staff members, whole departments, and local residents who serve on town commissions and boards to enhance the way that members of the town government and the public communicate and work together. To date, over 30 events consisting of off-site meetings, retreats, and trainings with a range of participants have been conducted.

The PDC was involved in an international project that occurred in 2003 in Central Maluku, Indonesia, in collaboration with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), the Institute for Social Transformation (INSIST), and an Indonesian non-governmental organization (NGO). The Interfaith Peacebuilding Institute was designed to foster a shared vision of community recovery through dialogue. In the aftermath of a devastating conflict between Christian and Muslim communities in the district, 40 participants assembled for a 4-day dialogue. Participants found this to be a new and empowering form of communication, and they expressed a clear desire to continue dialogue within and between their communities. The conversations explored many topics of mutual concern, including traditional and religious resources for recovery and community approaches to peace and reconstruction. In addition, the project included a research component that provided funding for an Institute monograph published by the ICMC and a journal article by Lowry and Littlejohn (2006), entitled “Dialogue and the Discourse of Peacebuilding in Maluku, Indonesia,” that appeared in Conflict Resolution Quarterly.

The work we did in San Carlos, California, between 1999 and 2002, provides a more comprehensive example of a PDC project (K. A. Pearce, 2002). The City Manager, Mike Garvey, had spent most of his energies and resources solving and repairing the infrastructure problems common to most metropolitan cities. When Sylvia Nelson became mayor in 1999, her goal was to move beyond the “fix-it” framework and focus on the dreams of San Carlos residents. Garvey enthusiastically endorsed her ideas, also believing that the city was ready for future visioning. Under Nelson’s leadership, the Quality of Life Steering Group was formed, consisting of 15 residents representing a cross-section of the community. Shortly after the formation of the group, the PDC received a Request for Proposal (RFP) asking us to design a half-day event similar to a “Future Search Conference” (e.g., Weisbord & Janoff, 2000) in which residents could focus on the quality of life in their community. Instead, we proposed a 4-month process with two community-wide bookend events, with additional means of gathering information from residents interspersed between the events. We were one of three organizations invited to provide a 1-hour presentation for the Quality of Life Steering Committee; the day after our presentation, we were awarded the contract. The committee told us that they liked our focus on process (several activities instead of one) and our emphasis on intergenerational facilitation. We noted that young people were conspicuously absent from the committee and we
said that we wanted the committee to recruit high school students to help us facilitate the first event; unfortunately, this was the only aspect of our work with that committee that did not go as expected, as the person who volunteered to recruit students was unable to do so.

Our first event was designed to elicit the dreams of residents; specifically, we asked them to identify what “quality of life” meant to them and to “blue sky” what this looked like in the manifestation of city projects, events, and activities. The Steering Committee did the recruiting for the event, keeping in mind the goal of including all segments of the community. We also trained the committee members to facilitate small group discussions using the Technology of Participation (ToP) workshop model of participation (see http://www.ica-usa.org/). The question that became the centerpiece for discussion was the following: “If the quality of life in San Carlos was as good as it could be, what would be happening?” The first meeting with approximately 120 residents was spirited, good-natured, and lively. The PDC summarized the ideas generated from the meeting and, together with the Steering Committee, we developed four broad scenarios of what would be happening in San Carlos to enhance the quality of life: emphases on (1) recreation, culture, and community programs; (2) traffic, public safety, and transportation; (3) economic development, economic vitality, and the environment; and (4) education.

The following meeting with the Steering Committee was designed to plan the second public meeting, which would occur in 3 months. During that second meeting, we decided collectively to mail a thank-you letter from the mayor to those who participated in the first public meeting, along with the four scenarios and visions developed from the meeting, and a one-page questionnaire to help structure a consistent set of conversations about what residents liked best and least, and the resources needed to implement each scenario. We asked each participant to interview the members of five households before the next public meeting to deepen and broaden the conversations occurring in the community. The city also posted this information on its Web site and in other public places. Our hope was that if most of the 120 residents did this activity and a handful of residents responded through the Internet, over 600 conversations would occur during the 3-month interval between meetings.

The second meeting enjoyed remarkable attendance, with 100 of the initial 120 residents participating (with many who were not able to attend mailing their interview results to the mayor), along with residents showing up for the first time. During that meeting, members of the PDC facilitated an NIF type of conversation deliberating the advantages and disadvantages of each scenario, and exploring the underlying values that were most important to the residents as the city made decisions about the next steps. Like the first meeting, residents were spirited and engaged as they heard various perspectives from those in their group, as well as the voices of household members who were interviewed and summarized by the residents who interviewed them.

During our follow-up meeting with the Steering Committee, the PDC presented a 40-page summary of the second public meeting. The report included three sections: a summary of each group, a summary of each scenario, and, overall recommendations. The Steering Committee handed this report to the city council, along with a recommendation that the committee work with the appropriate staff offices and personnel to implement the suggestions. The city council approved the recommendation, and the Steering Committee spent the next 2 years working with the staff (and with the PDC—we were rehired to work with the committee on this new phase) to make residents’ visions reality. Mayor Nelson sent a letter to participants thanking them for their participation and describing the next phase of the project. She also held a press conference to discuss the city’s vision and future plans for the Quality of Life project. The project has changed and expanded
Contributions to Applied Communication Scholarship

The methodology that has evolved from the PDC’s early activities and events counts as applied communication scholarship in several ways. The methodology is focused on the achievement of practical outcomes within contexts that inform and are informed by theory. This characteristic, of course, is consistent with most definitions of applied communication scholarship and the increasingly widespread view that theory and practice are reflexively connected (see Barge & Craig, this volume; Frey & SunWolf, this volume). Keyton (2000), for example, argued that applied communication research should be practical, arising in response to social problems and providing solutions for them; as she explained, it is the researcher’s task to “build triangulated relationships between problem, theory, and method” (p. 167). Wood (2000) has been the most explicit on this account, stating that the defining feature of applied communication research “is its insistence on putting theory and research into the service of practice and, equally, of studying practices to refine theory in order to gain new understandings of how communication functions and how it might function differently, or better” (p. 189).

By sometimes situating ourselves in a first-person position with the participants in our work, we align ourselves with some, but not all, applied communication researchers. We make this choice because we intend to go beyond descriptive and analytical research (i.e., studying others’ communication from a third-person position) to an interventionist research orientation (i.e., joining with others in communication, from a first-person position). In this regard, we concur with Frey’s (2000) statement that applied communication researchers should go “beyond the descriptive task of studying ‘an other’… [by] involving themselves in the life of ‘another’” (p. 181; see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume). However, our work includes research from the third-person perspective as well, as we find such research useful when it meets three conditions: (1) the research is informed by theory that is sufficiently reflexive, (2) the researcher engages directly with local participants, and (3) the purposes of the research are tied to the achievement of practical outcomes. Ultimately, it is our goal to use descriptive and analytical-based research as a resource for intervening into the communication of others and, we hope, for creating positive change in that communication.

We conceptualize our applied communication research program as comprising three levels, each of which operates in a hierarchical relationship to the others. We call one level “service delivery,” which consists of working with local participants to improve the quality of public communication in their communities, broadly defined. Not surprisingly, service delivery is focused on practical issues that arise from problem-oriented situations. More specifically, it consists of consultations, facilitations, and trainings that are designed to encourage and promote the use of dialogue, primarily as it operates in public contexts.

Theory development is a second level of our applied communication research program. In our projects, we focus on the continued development of CMM and related principles of social constructionism. Within the CMM framework, and consistent with Wood’s (2000) description of applied communication research, we base our approach to theory development on the always-shifting foundation of reflexivity. Thus, CMM evolves and develops as theoretical concepts are applied to concrete practices and, conversely, as the results of those practices are used to refine and gain insight into the theory.

Research and evaluation constitute the third level. We have used both qualitative research methods, such as thematic textual analysis (W. B. Pearce & Pearce, 2000a;
Spano & Calcagno, 1996), and quantitative research methods, such as closed-ended survey questionnaires (Spano, 2001), to investigate and evaluate our attempts at promoting public dialogue. Along with other scholars, we believe that applied scholarship should embrace the full array of investigatory approaches and traditions that characterize the methodological terrain of the communication field (Frey, 2000; Frey & SunWolf, this volume; Query et al., this volume; Wood, 2000).

Community-based action research figures more prominently in our work than in the standard list of methods used in communication; in fact, it is our preferred method. As Stringer (2007) explained, action research is a form of inquiry that favors collaborative and participatory procedures in which researchers assist local participants in defining, understanding, and developing action-oriented solutions to the problems that confront them.

The three contexts of service delivery, theory development, and research and evaluation have shifting hierarchical relationships among one another, meaning that any one of them can serve as a context for the others, depending on the contingencies of the situation and the goals and purposes we are trying to achieve. For example, when PDC members engage local participants in defining problems, we are likely to privilege service delivery as the highest context. Among other things, this stance obligates us to assume a practitioner role and adopt the grammar of the local community. Given a conflict between, for instance, collecting research data or helping the client, we unswervingly help the client. Conversely, as we engage colleagues in discussions of theory development, we are likely to assume an academic role within a more scholarly or philosophical form of discourse. It is important to note that the PDC methodology involves enacting all three levels, in differing relationships at different times, in response to a particular applied communication research project.

The choice of what context assumes the highest position is vitally important because it determines how a particular project is framed, including the sequence of actions that we and others take as the project develops and unfolds. It is fair to say that in the beginning, the PDC positioned theory development as the highest context, followed closely by service delivery as the middle context. Hence, service delivery was seen primarily as an experiment leading to improvements in the theory. Perhaps distinguishing us from other applied communication researchers, the research level was the lowest context, and was conducted to assess the effectiveness of our practice fully, as much as to test or extend our theory. Later in this chapter, we examine some of the implications for how we organized and balanced these three levels.

The Way We Work: The PDC Approach

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, the history of the PDC started long before the organization became official. We drew not only on the theory of CMM as it might be written in a communication textbook but also on a grammar of practice in which the theory and certain forms of practice already were productively intermingled (see, e.g., Littlejohn & Domenici, 2001; W. B. Pearce, 2001; W. B. Pearce & Pearce, 2000b). In what follows, we describe some of the key concepts that guide our approach and link these concepts to specific practices, actions, and techniques to illustrate how our approach to public dialogue works.

Taking a Communication Perspective

We take the position that the social world is polysemic—that every event and object is capable of being described, equally satisfactorily, in many different vocabularies, many
of which preclude the others. In this polysemic world, we act on the basis of a preferential option for a communication perspective, choosing to see events and objects of the social world as made and remade in processes of communication. This perspective generates the following primary questions:

- In description, what are people doing to and with each other? Out of what context are they acting? Into what context are they acting?
- In analysis, how is this social world being made?
- In critique and intervention, what are people making together? How can they make better social worlds?
- In action, how can people go forward together?

These questions give a distinctive flavor to our work, both in our research and practice. For example, our decision to privilege dialogue as a form of communication, and our understanding of what that entails, is shaped by a communication perspective (W. B. Pearce & Pearce, 2004). In the corporate world, there also is a major emphasis on dialogue, but most of this work is grounded on a particular concept of physics (specifically, the work of David Bohm; e.g., 2004) and a view of persons that reflects a cognitive individualism that stands in contrast to the social constructionism with which CMM has affinities. W. B. Pearce and Pearce (2000a) teased out some of these distinctions in their comparative analysis of what various practitioners call “dialogue.” A communication perspective also gives our work a distinctive flavor in comparison to other approaches to civic engagement, such as the 16 “discourse organizations” reviewed by Ryfe (2003), the “emerging field of public deliberation” surveyed by Williamson and Fung (2004, p. 3), and most of the projects featured in Gastil and Levine’s (2005) edited handbook on deliberative democracy or Gastil’s (2008) recent text.

How does our theoretical commitment to a communication perspective translate into practical action? Most immediately, it obligates us to foreground communication in all of the projects and events we design and facilitate. Consider, for example, a typical PDC event: a large community forum designed to give local residents, elected officials, and professional staff in a community the opportunity to identify and discuss the most pressing issues in their city (Spano, 2006). The communicative groundwork for this forum was established in news releases and invitation letters, all of which emphasized the interactive nature of the event and the opportunity for forum participants to talk and listen to each other about community issues. This message was reiterated by a member of the PDC at the beginning of the event as part of opening remarks. Note that these context-setting descriptions focus on the process and structure of the event rather than on the content. In line with a communication perspective, we seek to call forth the constitutive nature of the conversations that take place in public dialogue projects. We are successful to the extent that participants come to recognize that community issues and community events—indeed, the very nature of the “community” itself—are created and recreated through processes of communication.

**Focusing on the Form of Communication**

Simply put, the grammar of practice of the PDC assumes that if one gets the form of communication right, good things will happen. As a result, we pay less attention to things that others treat as important, such as the attitudes and beliefs of the participants in our projects, or their knowledge about certain policies or issues. We see ourselves as the curators of the process of communication, nurturing and supporting particular forms of communication. Rather than experts on the topic, we aspire to be “virtuosos” (W. B.
Pearce & Pearce, 2000a) in the arts of calling into being forms of communication that have certain characteristics.

Focusing on the form of communication, of course, is translated into practice in all aspects of the PDC approach, perhaps most noticeably in our insistence on structuring projects and events in such a way that they create conditions and opportunities for people to participate in dialogic forms of communication. Our conceptualization of dialogue draws from the work of Martin Buber (e.g., 1970), who focused on the relational properties of dialogue as a process for navigating the tensions between self and other. From this conceptualization, we derived a number of working principles and integrated these into our grammar of practice. For example, when facilitating events, we place an equal or greater emphasis on listening as speaking, adopt an inclusive language that welcomes as many different voices into the process as possible, try to ensure that all participants have the experience of being heard and understood, approach difference and conflict as sites for exploration and growth, take a systemic or relational view that focuses on the co-construction of meaning and action, and embrace an appreciative orientation that emphasizes the positive resources of a community or group rather than its problems and deficits. We seek to incorporate these principles into our facilitation practices to foster forms of communication that have the qualities and characteristics of dialogue.

Using CMM Concepts to Understand the Communication Process

CMM views communication systemically, but from a very specific systemic perspective. It has much more affinity with second-order cybernetics, chaos theory, and complex adaptive systems than with information theory or general systems theory. That is, it does not so much look at wholes as at patterns of iterative processes. In this way of thinking, communication always is a matter of doing something, in specific contexts, and in a give-and-take, turn-taking relationship with other people that produces interactive sequences that have an order. One of the key models in CMM is the “serpentine” process, in which the management of meaning undulates as the string of actions extends into the future.

Taking this idea on board, in our practice, we always look at what is happening now as being after something else and before something else again. One of our criticisms of some other practitioner groups is that they think of doing “events” rather than facilitating “processes,” or, in systemic language, we do not share their belief in the efficacy of “one-shot interventions.” To the contrary, in our work, we regularly start each meeting with a sometimes lengthy reminder of what has gone before and how that has shaped what we will do in the present meeting, and we end with a very clear and credible statement of what will happen next. From a purely practitioner’s perspective, we know that people will drop out or develop a cynical apathy if their hard work disappears, but from a communication perspective, we understand such actions as a failure to achieve the quality of communication that permits good things to happen.

Strings of communicative actions are not undifferentiated, of course. We have borrowed from Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) the idea of punctuation (in which perceived causality stems from what is perceived as the first act in a sequence), and from Harré and Secord (1972) the idea of episodes (in which a narrative depends on the events designated as the beginning and ending of the story). The idea of episodes was used to good effect in two research studies: Spano and Calcagno (1996) analyzed the episodic structure of one of the PDC’s Kaleidoscope sessions, and Spano (2001) described the Cupertino Community Project as a series of phases. We utilize the concepts of punctuation and episodic structure most directly in the development of strategic process designs and event designs. For example, when mapping out the phases of a project or event with local participants, we purposefully draw attention to the sequence
Each action is meaningful, of course, but it also has multiple meanings. CMM excels in illuminating the complexity of communication. In this instance, the theory unfolds the meanings of each act within a cluster of reciprocally contextualized stories having to do with what episode is being performed, what relationship exists (or is desired or feared) among participants, and what identities various participants have in this situation or in the organizational or ethnic culture in which the event occurs. This conceptualization is CMM’s hierarchy model.

With the hierarchy model in mind, as we design and facilitate public dialogue processes, we are very careful to analyze the ordinal relationship among embedded stories and to act strategically to emphasize those stories that best serve as contexts for forms of communication that enable participants to go forward together productively. Consider, for example, the following exchange in which a PDC facilitator responds to a comment from a group participant with a question designed to produce a different hierarchical order in the participant’s cultural and relational contexts:

**Participant:** What I see happening here is that our community is being taken over by these new immigrants, and this is creating conflict with the old-timers, the people who have lived here for a long time. [This comment locates culture as the highest level of the hierarchy.]

**Facilitator:** How would you characterize your relationships with the new immigrants? In what ways are they different, if at all, from your relationships with the old-timers? [This question is designed to place relationships as the highest context.]

CMM’s daisy model provides another way of illuminating the complexity of events. We assume that each act is part of multiple conversations, each with its own hierarchy of reciprocally embedded contexts. When we work, hundreds of people often are in the room, many of whom have passionate commitments to one side or another of the topics on the table, and most of whom either do not know the others there or perceive them as “enemies.” The daisy model depicts any action as surrounded by numerous petals, each representing a different conversation in which the meaning of an act might vary. In situations such as the ones in which we work, every statement or action immediately becomes a “turn” in multiple conversations, given meaning by the stories that contextualize it in those conversations, and calling forth specific responses.

As practitioners, we take the complexity of communication on board as a caution against trying to overmanage the meanings of things or the actions that people take. Rather, our attention is on the form of communication. Like chaos theorists, we believe that communication is unpredictable and that it is strongly affected by various “attractors,” initial conditions, and other relevant concepts. We set ourselves to be, as good facilitators, sufficiently involved with the communication processes that we facilitate so that we are aligned with their ebbs and flows, and sufficiently detached so that we can make strategic decisions about whether and in what manner to intervene.

**Using Coordinated Management of Meaning Concepts to Develop a Public Dialogue Model**

We developed a three-level model for thinking about the flow or patterns of public dialogue as they unfold over time (K. A. Pearce, 2002). The “top” level is called “strategic
process design” and looks at patterns over a sequence of meetings or specific events. Unlike conventional, top-down methods of public communication (see Yankelovich, 1991), public dialogue strategic designs engage community members at the beginning of the process, before issues are identified and actions for resolution are formulated. Moreover, the process unfolds organically; meetings or events build off each other as they move toward emergent rather then pre-established outcomes. K. A. Pearce (2002), for example, outlined a strategic process design that consists of five phases, labeled according to the acronym SHEDD: (1) Getting started, (2) hearing all the voices, (3) enriching the conversation, (4) deliberating the options, and (5) deciding and moving forward together (see also K. A. Pearce & Pearce, 2001). Spano (2006) outlined a comparable process design consisting of six phases: (1) issue identification, (2) eliciting different views, (3) framing the issue, (4) generating options for action, (5) deliberating and deciding, and (6) implementing public agreements.

The “middle” level is called “event design” and focuses on specific meetings. Among other things, we design a meeting differently if it occurs at the beginning or at the end of a process, indicating that the goals and structures of a particular event depend on how and where the event fits into the overall strategic design. For example, an event that occurs in the context of “hearing all the voices” or “eliciting different views” will have a less structured format than an event that is designed to produce a specific decision. Indeed, part of the trick to designing successful public dialogue meetings and events involves balancing the tension between openness and structure (Spano, 2006).

Typically, PDC meetings and events take the form of small groups (e.g., discussion groups, deliberation groups, and study circles), large public forums (50–150 attendees), one-on-one interviews, and facilitation training workshops. Although there are a number of stand-alone event designs available to public dialogue practitioners, such as open space technology (Owen, 2008) and future search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000), we almost always design meetings and events that are customized to the unique contingencies of the situation in which we work.

The “lowest” level is called “in-the-moment intervention and facilitation skills” and refers to those things that can be said at a specific moment during a meeting that changes the meeting from one form of communication to another. For example, a pause followed by a question seeking understanding might function as an attractor (to use the language of chaos theory) of dialogue, whereas immediately responding with a rebuttal of what was just said might initiate a debate, and responding with an insult might initiate a fight. In addition to enacting skills that foster dialogue as the preferred form of communication, it also is important to recognize that the use of a particular facilitation technique is made in response to the particular event in which the technique is used. For example, a facilitator who is leading a group to identify the full range of issues facing its community will employ facilitation skills differently than the facilitator who is asking community members to choose from among a list of issues that has been generated already.

The PDC has taken on a number of facilitation techniques and practices used by other practitioner groups, and, in some cases, we have modified them to fit our approach to public dialogue. In addition to standard facilitation practices, such as time management, active listening, and ensuring that everyone participates, we also seek to use and develop what might be called “advanced” techniques. Two techniques are central to our approach; the first was adapted for use in public contexts from our work with systemic family therapists (McNamee, Lannamann & Tomm, 1983; W. B. Pearce & Pearce, 1999) and the second from our work with the “appreciative inquiry” community (e.g., Barrett & Fry, 2005; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, 2005; Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006; Reed, 2007; Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007). Systemic questioning is a
technique used to draw out relationships and connections within communities, groups, and organizations, and *appreciative questioning* is used to inquire into the positive resources that exist within communities, groups, and organizations. Both of these facilitation techniques are used, of course, to initiate discussion and conversation; at the same time, they also serve as a basis for reflecting and reframing what others say.

These concepts and models have furthered our thinking and development of communication theory, particularly CMM and public dialogue, and their uses in community settings have sensitized us to the challenges and demands of the scholar–practitioner model of applied communication research. We next describe some of the challenges that we have faced and the lessons learned from them.

**Paradoxes, Tensions, and Lessons Learned**

Working skillfully in communities as applied communication researchers requires abilities that transcend the domains of scholarship and praxis. In our work, we have talked among ourselves about the need to be “artisans” or “code-switchers” as we tack back and forth between conversations with communication scholars, community leaders, and city residents. In this section, we reflect on the paradoxes and tensions of doing applied communication research in an organizational context and the lessons we have learned about public dialogue processes.

In the spirit of deepening our learning, as we prepared this chapter and in keeping with the reiterative cycle of “doing” applied communication research, we conducted interviews with some of the key people involved in a variety of PDC projects as a way to enrich our stories of what has worked well and what we could have done differently. Among the people we interviewed were city managers, city staff, project participants, and members of the PDC’s board of directors. Quotations and excerpts from these interviews are included in this section.

**Paradoxes and Tensions of Doing Applied Communication Research within an Organizational Framework**

As a number of communication scholars recently have observed, paradoxes and tensions are normal conditions of modern organizational life and, as such, they should be embraced as potential resources for theory development and practical action (e.g., Harter & Krone, 2001; Pepper & Larson, 2006; Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004). Moreover, alternative organizations, such as the PDC, which are modeled on a dialogic sensibility rather than a technical or rational one, are well positioned to investigate and benefit from the paradoxical situations that inevitably result from being an “organization.”

Since the time that members of the PDC made the decision to organize, we have encountered and sometimes struggled with three pragmatic paradoxes, each of which has wide-ranging implications for our theoretical and methodological approaches and for our organizational structure. Each of these paradoxes are described below.

**Academic and Practical Orientations**

By far, the most challenging aspect of our work is managing the paradox and tension that often comes from pursuing both academic and practical goals. On the one hand, as we interact with our academic colleagues, we are pressed to articulate the theoretical and methodological basis of our approach. However, as we leave these conversa-
tions and join with public officials, residents, and other people in applied settings, we are obliged to adopt the grammar of the local community. The PDC functions as both a scholarly group and a practitioner group, each of which requires a distinct kind of knowledge, grammar, and sensibility. The paradox occurs when our commitments to one group undermine our commitments to the other, recognizing, of course, that we are committed to both.

Given that the PDC was built on the foundation of the scholar–practitioner model, it is not surprising that we have fully embraced this paradox. Indeed, we find the challenges inherent in working with different communities to be enriching and invigorating. Such work has led us, for example, to grapple with questions about whether to introduce local participants to our theoretical framework of CMM and social constructionism, and how to do so. Our work also has forced us to consider the nature of academic research and how best to report the findings from applied communication projects to the scholarly community.

How successful have we been in navigating this paradox? One way to answer this question is to listen to how people from different discourse communities evaluate the PDC. An academic colleague praised the theoretical focus of the PDC, claiming that our scholarly approach distinguishes us from other practitioner groups and is a major contributor to our success. Another person, a city manager with whom we have worked for a number of years, claimed just the opposite. He singled out the PDC’s applied orientation as our most distinctive and effective quality. He cautioned us not to become too theoretical or academic because “it might take away from the main value to what you do, which is producing practical outcomes.”

We have learned that the ability to manage the tensions of what we are doing in any given moment (e.g., Who is the client? In what discourse are we operating? What is the highest context in this moment?) comes from working with a scholarly team rather than working individually. The “collective group perspective” enables us most effectively to name, act into, and manage the inevitable tensions experienced as we conduct applied communication research.

**Formal and Informal Structures**

When the PDC officially incorporated as a nonprofit organization, the move imposed a number of constraints on the organization, as prescribed by law, such as electing officers to manage day-to-day operations and selecting a board of directors to oversee finances. Moving from a loosely affiliated collection of individuals to a formal organizational structure required us to be much more explicit in setting out rules, procedures, and guidelines. Here lies the paradox of organizational structure and formalization (Stohl & Cheney, 2001): how to develop a creative, spontaneous, and nontraditional organization within a context that requires formal roles and decision-making procedures.

For a variety of reasons, we have not been very successful in managing this paradox. Indeed, it has become something of an Achilles heel, the one point that threatens to undermine the entire organization. After trying a number of different organizational models, ranging from highly centralized to highly decentralized, the PDC currently is organized with a minimum level of formal structure and decision making. One unintended (even paradoxical) consequence of our ongoing struggle with organizational structure is that the PDC actually has developed into a more disorganized organization and, conversely, our methodological approach has become more diffuse and varied. Regrettably, this change makes it more difficult for us, in a systematic way, to reflect, test, and build on our theoretical perspective and ways of working.
Primary and Secondary Commitments

One of the reasons for incorporating as a nonprofit organization was to enable the PDC to seek grants and donations, thus providing the financial resources necessary for large-scale research and development efforts. As it turned out, we have had limited success securing these types of funding (we received two grants from the Packard Foundation to help fund our early work in Cupertino), and have relied, instead, on individual contracts tied to specific projects and activities. Although these contracts have provided us with sufficient resources to engage in a respectable amount of service-delivery activity, they have not provided the level of funding that allows us to do PDC work on or even near a full-time basis. Almost all of the PDC project managers hold full-time academic appointments, or what we sometimes fondly refer to as “our day jobs.” This situation creates another paradox: The secondary commitment to PDC among its members makes it difficult to secure the time and resources necessary to establish a foundation that might enable the members to make PDC their primary commitment.

Responding to this situation has not been nearly as difficult as the paradox of formalization. Indeed, although there certainly are benefits to making PDC our primary commitment, there also are advantages to maintaining a secondary commitment to the organization. Having full-time jobs enables us to be selective about the types of applied projects that we choose. There have been several cases, for example, where we decided to walk away from potentially lucrative projects because the leadership (e.g., city manager, city council members, city staff, or public officials) had a hidden agenda or pre-established outcome in mind that prohibited us from developing a genuine and authentic public dialogue process. As a corollary to this point, a city manager with whom we work said that she appreciates that the business of the PDC is not to create business for ourselves. “If you don’t think you can add value,” she said, “you’ll suggest other options and arrangements.” The ability to choose our projects based on principle rather than money helps us to stay grounded in a scholar–practitioner approach to the work.

Lessons Learned about Civic Engagement, Public Dialogue, and Applied Communication Research

Although the PDC uses CMM in all levels of our work, most of our clients know very little, if anything, of the theory and, as discussed previously, that is one of the tensions of using a scholar–practitioner model in community settings. When it comes to working with our clients on a public dialogue process, we realize that the highest context for city officials is the effect that a project has on the city rather than its contribution to the theory to which we subscribe. From our perspective, however, we always are balancing contexts of theory, practice, and research, which makes doing applied communication research (rather than working, for example, solely as practitioners) possible.

We divide this section into three subcategories: what we have learned about civic engagement, community dialogue, and doing applied communication research. The articulation of these lessons takes us to the edge of our learning and provides the frame for the next iterative cycle of research and theory development.

Lessons Learned About Civic Engagement

Civic engagement refers to the direct involvement of residents in community issues and decision-making processes. We have learned over the years that people, even very busy people working in fast-paced urban areas, such as Silicon Valley, have stakes in their
communities and are willing to volunteer their time if they believe they can affect change. This learning stands in stark contrast to the popular notion that the public is apathetic, disengaged, and too preoccupied with its self-interests to participate in civic engagement activities. To the contrary, it is our experience that as participants experience ownership of a public participation process and, thereby, have a meaningful say in the outcomes, they become more invested in their communities. This leads to our first lesson: Ordinary residents will participate in the civic life of their communities if the process in which they are asked to participate has integrity. By “integrity,” we mean that the outcomes are shapeable in important ways by participants themselves and not predetermined by government officials, community leaders, technical experts, or others who assume positions of privilege and power. However, how do residents know whether a process truly is characterized by meaningful participation with results that are participant driven?

One answer we give to this question is that civic engagement requires support from the “top” for initiatives from the “bottom.” It requires, elicits, and supports a different type of leadership by elected officials and city staff than what traditionally has been perceived as leadership. A story from San Carlos, California, illustrates how unusual is this model of leadership. The local press learned about the Quality of Life project that the PDC designed and facilitated, and called Mayor Sylvia Nelson to ask what would be the result. As Sylvia recounted the story, the ensuing conversation left the reporter scratching his head. The reporter expected a list of the mayor’s pet projects but, instead, Sylvia replied by saying that she did not know what the outcome would be; in fact, it was important for her not to know, because the process itself was designed to determine those outcomes. This answer was as incomprehensible as if she suddenly had started speaking in a foreign language! “What do you mean you don’t know the outcome?” she was asked, incredulously. We are sure that the reporter left wondering what in the world was going on in San Carlos.

The all-too-familiar DAD (“Decide–Advocate–Defend”) model of public communication (K. A. Pearce, 2002) is initiated when people or groups commit themselves to bringing about some predetermined policy. Leadership in this model is expressed by analyzing the situation, selecting an appropriate response to it, and championing the “right policy” in a way that garners sufficient support to get it enacted. In a public dialogue process, leadership is expressed by championing the “right process,” such that the energies, creativity, and wisdom of the whole community are brought to bear. The leader becomes the custodian or curator of the process, not the standard-bearer of one of the many ideas for what the outcome of the process might be. The second lesson, then, might be stated: Civic engagement requires leaders who champion an inclusive, genuine dialogic process rather than promote a set of predetermined ideas or outcomes.

This model of leadership is not easy. In his book on cognitive complexity and the challenges of modern life, Kegan (1994) described leaders who take charge of a process rather than of a particular outcome as operating at the more demanding “systemic” level. For this to happen, such leaders have to unlearn, resist, or somehow avoid falling into the stereotype of the public held by many public officials and administrators. There is much anecdotal evidence supporting the conclusion that the public is ignorant of the technical facts associated with many public policies, shallow and self-serving in its attention to these issues, and fickle in its support. Many leaders think that involving the public in any meaningful process is like opening Pandora’s Box; it is better for the functioning of government to “keep the lid on” by keeping the public happy and at a distance. However, as Yankelovich (1991) noted, the public is not always ignorant, shallow, and fickle; these characteristics, at least sometimes, are caused by their experiences of being distanced through the DAD pattern of public discourse, with processes that claim to
Kimberly Pearce, Shawn Spano, and W. Barnett Pearce invite their participation but result in predetermined conclusions and are conducted using public event designs that limit their voices to, for instance, a series of disjointed 3-minute statements. Hence, the characteristics of the public that some leaders cite as reasons for politics-as-usual may be a result of politics-as-usual. If the public is invited into a genuine civic-engagement process, can it—will it—prove to be a valuable collaborator? Leaders of successful civic-engagement processes need to believe that it can, and actions based on that belief just might prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although there are many reasons why leaders are reluctant to initiate genuine civic-engagement processes, one particularly significant reason is the polarized and adversarial nature of public communication today (e.g., W. B. Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Tannen, 2001). One of our interview participants, a city manager, put it this way:

The problems that the public encounters today are as significant as they’ve ever been, yet there is less trust. This has led many government officials to use consultants and facilitators as a defense mechanism, as a way to control difficult people or to keep a lid on things so they don’t get out of hand.

Of course, this approach only perpetuates the negative spiral and self-fulfilling prophecy described above. In the case of this particular city manager, he realized the need and value of genuine public participation, and recognized it as an integral feature of our methodology. As he explained, “The PDC is the only association I know of in my 41 years in local government that tries to promote a genuine dialogue, a really and truly balanced approach that creates opportunities for everyone to talk and listen.”

This type of leadership requires a leader to support a process even though it might not lead to the outcome that she or he favors. There is a kind of emotional maturity involved in staying with a process because one knows that the process is important, even though it does not necessarily go the way one wants. Some of us in the PDC learned this lesson when we were training to be mediators. Our instructor said that intelligence and good problem-solving skills can keep a person from being a good mediator! This statement surprised us, because we thought these were desirable attributes. How could these attributes prevent us from being good mediators? He explained that intelligent people who are good problem solvers often are able to see a solution to the dispute being mediated, but it is not the solution that the disputants see, and any attempt to persuade or influence them to accept that solution changes “mediation” into something else. In the same way, a mayor or a city manager interested in collaborating with the public in the governance of his or her city must respect the public’s ideas of what is the “solution” or the “vision.” Notice that we said “respect”—that does not mean that the mayor or city manager cannot be a part, and a very important part, of the process but that he or she may not make categorical decisions to disregard the voice of the public.

Sometimes when we are beginning a new project, we do a song-and-dance routine with the “leaders”—those who have the ability to veto the decisions reached during a civic-engagement process, or to call off the process before it is finished. We tell them that they will hear things that they did not expect to hear and do not want to hear; that the process will reach a point where it seems that it is about to explode or stall, and that they will be tempted to end it. However, we explain that these are the “golden moments” for which we are waiting! These are the moments in which whatever happens shakes things loose and shapes the rest of the project. It is precisely during these times that the leaders must recommit themselves to support the project. As another city manager we interviewed said:
It is critical for communication consultants like the PDC to prepare leaders so they know what they are in for in terms of time and outcomes. This is especially important if they are looking for a quick fix. If the leader is not prepared, then pre-work is necessary to ensure realistic expectations. You have to at least try to take them down a path they may not be prepared to go.

Once city officials experience the benefits of a productive public dialogue process, they are more inclined to involve citizens meaningfully in future processes.

However, the advantages of this shift in decision making also has its downsides. The most significant challenge to this work is time. Our third lesson, therefore, is: Civic engagement requires a significant commitment of time. As more people are involved in a process, the time it takes, for instance, to coordinate events, hear all voices, follow up effectively, and keep all relevant participants “in the loop” grows exponentially. This issue of time was one of the frustrations voiced by some of the interviewees. One of them put it like this:

If you are coming together for such important work, make sure there is enough time for the work to be done—time during the meeting and reflective time between meetings. It also is important not to schedule meetings during the summer vacation period.

Balancing the time needed for participants in a public participation process to do their best work against all the other time-consuming obligations they face is a tension point that is not easily resolved.

Several of the people we interviewed recognized time as a limitation or challenge of the PDC approach. This was especially evident in terms of training and skill building, as one of the interviewees indicated:

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the PDC’s approach is the cost in time, particularly the need for trained and sophisticated facilitators or practitioners to get the process started and to serve as resource people. It seems that the skills taught, or the awareness required, are not intuitive, given the dominant communication practices in our culture. It’s not the kind of skill one can teach with low-cost, low-energy handouts or one-way instruction. It seems best to teach and learn it through modeling, with plenty of time for reflection. This works against quick solutions.

Although the time-consuming nature of public dialogue is a challenge, it is important to point out that there are benefits as well: Participants come to a deeper understanding of important issues in their community than they otherwise would, and they are more thoroughly invested and committed to the outcomes and decisions that are made about those issues.

A fourth learning about civic engagement also involves time: We learned that initial goals give way to new ones as the process unfolds (Spano, 2006). We did not realize this until the 2-year project with the city of San Carlos had ended and we reflected on our interviews with participants. One of the questions we asked participants was, “Was the goal of the process achieved?” Interestingly enough, as we probed, we discovered that just about everyone had a different story of what was the “goal” of the process. We found the diverse stories very curious, as the project goals were clearly stated in the city’s RFPs. Participants’ various stories revealed that a public dialogue process is a “moving target”
and without realizing or naming it, those involved in the process co-constructed new objectives and goals as the process unfolded. Thus, for example, the initial goal of involving a broad constituency in identifying future goals to improve the quality of life in San Carlos metamorphosed into the implementation of action steps. Once learned, it seems obvious that goals will change, and, as well, expectations, because the process changes what we know and how we know it. Our fourth lesson, then, is: By definition, a process invites initially stated goals to shift as new relationships form, new ideas are generated, and perspectives are enlarged. If participants can be aware of these shifting goals and name them, the new goals they co-construct will be shared goals.

We suggest that this fourth lesson be interpreted as part of our commitment to praxis and practical theory (see Barge & Craig, this volume). In his assessment of some of our earlier Cupertino Project work, for example, Stewart (2001) noted that this orientation was demonstrated when PDC members

changed plans and activities in response to feedback,...consistently approached the project as a fluid, complex, and emergent system of interdependent people and processes,...[and] encouraged all participants to join them in the serious and focused process of making-it-up-as-they-go-along. (p. 239)

**Lessons Learned About Public Dialogue**

In the preceding paragraphs, we talked about the extraordinary leadership required to shift from the DAD model to the public deliberation and dialogue model of decision making. One reason this shift is so difficult is the lack of perspicacious distinctions our society makes with respect to communication. Making various patterns of communication visible is a goal of our work, and it is why we privilege the underutilized patterns of public dialogue over the well-trod patterns of public debate and adversarial one-upmanship. Our experience with a variety of public processes reinforced that communication is invisible and that foregrounding patterns of communication is a foreign idea. However, when people are invited into dialogic patterns of relating, they want more. We found this claim to be true at all levels (e.g., working one-on-one with city staff or committees and observing small group discussions at public meetings), and we consistently observed that participants worked better, responded more favorably, were more receptive to ideas contrary to theirs, and arrived at better decisions when the communication was characterized by respect, deep listening, openness, and curiosity.

Although things will go better when people feel that their ideas are valued and conversations are respectful and open, this is easier said than done. It is very difficult to remain open in a conversation with someone with whom we disagree and about an issue in which we have a stake. Until our society acknowledges the importance of foregrounding patterns of communication, engaging in public dialogue has the best chance of flourishing in discussions facilitated by skilled practitioners. This idea was echoed earlier by the interviewee who emphasized the need for dialogue training, skill, and awareness as a counterweight to more conventional forms of public communication. Our work over the years, thus, has reinforced lesson five: Dialogue does not occur naturally; it is a rare form of communication that must be carefully nurtured and facilitated to be enacted successfully. Such success can happen in communities when skilled practitioners train, model, and invite participants into dialogic patterns of relating. Left to their own devices, most communities resort to more common, and adversarial, patterns of communication.

The current city manager of Cupertino surely would agree with this fifth lesson, having come to recognize the need for trained practitioners to bring about dialogue. When
asked to identify particular events or examples that effectively demonstrated the PDC approach, he pointed to one of the potentially controversial public forums that the city sponsored to address racial and cultural issues. The topic was “a real difficult one,” he said, “and yet participants were able to have a really good conversation.” From his perspective, this was made possible because the PDC design team and facilitators “set parameters for dialogue so that people could say what was really bothering them, even if it sounded harsh.” He was especially impressed when an older White woman told the other participants at her table that she did not really like Chinese people, and when the other participants, including two Chinese Americans, responded by asking her about her experiences and why she felt the way she did. He went on to say, “Without the parameters for dialogue, I don’t think the woman would have made that statement and I don’t think the others would have been able to hear and respond to her like they did.”

Lessons Learned About Applied Communication Research

As noted previously, the scholar–practitioner model underlying the work of the PDC requires a reciprocal engagement between academic and local communities; that is, it requires the agility and ability to move back and forth between scholarly discourse and the discourse of local participants. This feature of our applied communication research program is demonstrated most clearly in the multiple commitments we make to service delivery, theory development, and research and evaluation. Indeed, the inclusion of service delivery—a form of communication intervention—within the context of theory and research is one of the features that distinguishes our approach from other applied research methods. The fluid and ever-shifting position of the researcher within our methodology requires the development of skills, sensibilities, and judgments that include yet extend beyond the traditional parameters of quantitative and qualitative communication research. Lesson six, therefore, is: Communication scholarship that fully embraces the reflexive relationship between theory and practice opens the door to creative and unconventional approaches to applied research.

We strive as much as possible to engage dialogically with the different discourse communities we encounter in our work. This feature of our applied communication approach is marked by a number of principles and practices that transcend the boundaries of most quantitative and qualitative research methods. First, this view situates dialogue as both the object of our scholarly investigations and as the means through which we inquire into the results of our practices. Among other things, this perspective places a premium on what Kvale (1995, p. 26) called the “quality of craftsmanship,” or the ability to inquire and assess in an ongoing fashion the nature of a public dialogue project as it unfolds and evolves.

Second, it involves engaging in dialogic conversations with a variety of stakeholders about the meanings of various actions and outcomes associated with a research project. In this way, research claims and conclusions themselves are polysemic, open to the multiple interpretations of stakeholders who are located both inside and outside the local community setting. One of the tasks of the researcher, then, is to facilitate these different interpretations.

A third way that our applied research approach enlarges the domain of traditional quantitative and qualitative inquiry is by assessing the consequences of the dialogic actions and interventions that are taken in collaboration with local participants. These are not static judgments, of course, given that public dialogue projects evolve organically as goals and outcomes shift and change (see lesson four). This view implies that judgments related to consequences, or what Kvale (1995, p. 32) called “pragmatic validity,”
also must be assessed in an ongoing manner and through ongoing dialogue with relevant stakeholders. Moreover, it follows that judgments about the effectiveness of dialogic actions will be based in different sources of evidence and experience, including both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Ultimately, however, judgments about consequences and outcomes rest on whether the relevant stakeholders experience those outcomes as desirable and worthwhile. We see our research task as initiating dialogic actions in collaboration with others and assessing the consequences of those actions in dialogic conversation with others.

Concluding Thoughts

For those of us involved in the PDC, the journey to improve the quality of communication started long before the organization was a gleam in anyone’s eye. The formalization of the PDC provided a scaffold for us to do applied communication research in ways that otherwise never would have been possible. The organization legitimates our work in the world, as there is something about being affiliated with a bona fide organization to which city managers, city councils, and community residents can relate. However, unbeknownst to them, the organization and the very work itself are grounded in communication theory and applied communication research. Before we ventured into our work with the PDC, we could not have appreciated the potential and power of doing the type of applied communication research that we now do. Our understanding of the dance between research and practice has grown, shifted, and deepened. We have seen firsthand the contribution that our discipline can make and the good things that can happen when, as Frey (2000) said, we bring our communication expertise and resources to bear to make a difference in people’s lives.

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