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A Clash of Rhetorical Cultures: Q&A with Dale Cyphert, Ph.D.

*The next time you open PowerPoint, you may play a part in deciding the outcome of a major culture clash. According to **Dale Cyphert**, Ph.D., of the University of Northern Iowa, the Western model of formal speaking has long been at odds with other ways of communicating. And now that we're moving from oratory to MTV, we just may be witnessing something entirely new.*

Cliff Atkinson: *Dale, is the field of "presentations" distinct from other types of communication?*

Dale Cyphert: Only in the sense that we still think about presentations in a very traditional way. Once we realize that Oprah Winfrey is one of this century's most eloquent "presenters", we'll be past the "stand up and talk to an audience" presumptions about what it means to be a "speaker." The old distinctions between formal, prepared "public" communication and informal, heartfelt "personal" communication are becoming pretty meaningless.

CA: *How do you define rhetoric?*

DC: Rhetoric is about "who" gets to participate, "what" information will be used, and "how" it is decently done. Rhetoric governs collective decision-making and action for a community of human beings, and its practices are culture specific. Western culture, for example, idealizes participation by "all" citizens. Of course, citizenship was initially limited to Athenian male landowners, and proper presentation style is still quite masculine. Similarly, Western philosophers have idealized objective, "scientific" information, which leads to presentations that are dry, legalistic and even heartless to many women, non-Western or young media-age audiences.

Probably most important, rhetoric is defined in the Western tradition as only the persuasive arguments of authoritative speakers given to "well-prepared" audiences who could follow their careful reasoning. Other means of communication — graphic arts, music, theater, dance, poetry — had been deemed improper for decision-making because they make it too easy to sway people's emotions.

CA: *How have presentation norms changed in the past century?*

DC: By and large, they can be described as becoming "more like television." That's a really simplistic way to put it, since television has changed too, but presentations have gone from oratory to MTV. The old prototype of eloquence was a single individual (usually male) giving a prepared, formal articulation of "good reasons" to a patient, attentive audience. The eloquent presenter now is the facilitator (often acting as part of team) inviting a fragmented, multi-tasking group toward a common perception with stories, imagery, and personal magnetism.

CA: *What is the state of rhetoric in the broader culture?*

DC: In general, Western culture has discovered (what a surprise!) that other communities engage in collective decision-making in "non-Western" and "feminine" and "oral" ways. As a result, the increasingly interconnected global community is showing signs of accepting new decision-makers (i.e. women! natives! tree-huggers!), new kinds of information (i.e. personal narratives, tacit knowledge), and new ways of coming to agreement (i.e. political polls, sound-bite debates, political theater).

CA: *And what is the general state of rhetoric in business?*

DC: I find business to be a particularly interesting case because it is a community that has always exhibited some decision-making norms that are characteristic of oral cultures (i.e. hierarchical

structures, reliance on expert/authority evidence, implicit and conversational decision-making processes). At the same time, managers — or at least management theorists — have adopted an extreme version of the rational, objective norms of what is sometimes called "essay text literacy"— the rules of Western rhetoric taken to the most analytical, articulated extreme. It's a contradiction that creates some dysfunction in the actual decision-making of many organizational groups. Academically-trained MBAs try to make decisions with highly sophisticated analytical tools, exhibiting very little respect for the more orally-inclined first-line supervisors and workforce who are screaming bloody murder that the wonks just don't "get it."

CA: *What is the significance of this conflict between the norms of oral and rational cultures?*

DC: What I think has happened over the past 30 years in managerial theory is actually the beginning of significant change in rhetorical culture. Whether corporate changes are leading or simply reflecting broader cultural changes is certainly a point of discussion, but I'm inclined to think the corporate community is farther along in the development of practical methods of rhetoric that are appropriate to a global community. They have now discovered "stakeholder relationships" and "tacit knowledge" and "narratives to communicate a vision" and are finding that these rhetorical methods are far more effective in creating viable decision-making communities, or as they like to call them, "learning organizations."

CA: *So these are not fads or just the latest buzzwords?*

DC: Well, the new words picked to describe something are always a bit faddish. The key is to look at what the words are describing. What you'll find is that "learning organizations" and "complex systems" and "postmodern organizations" and "secondary orality" and "sustainable organizations" are all ways of looking at the same very fundamental changes in how we go about working collectively.

CA: *What is visual eloquence?*

DC: For the purposes of my teaching, at least, I concentrate on a) visually presenting a clear, consistent, personal (or corporate) image, b) using visual images (photographs, graphs, diagrams) to enhance conceptual understanding, and c) tapping into an audience's emotional responses to visual images. There's much more to it, of course. That's what keeps the rhetorical critics producing all those journal articles!

CA: *What is your general impression of the PowerPoint presentations you've seen in business and education?*

DC: A lot of what I've seen has been pretty uninspired, uncreative, and to tell you the truth, downright boring. The typical presenter simply offers an outline of his or her speech, sometimes illustrated with photos or clip art. Now this is not to say that I haven't ever seen slides used effectively, but the norm is certainly less than impressive.

CA: *What is the quality of rhetorical structures you've witnessed in the PowerPoint presentations you've seen?*

DC: Well, most of the presentations don't even try to conform to the norms of narrative, personal relationship and visuality that seem to characterize the emerging rhetoric. Oh sure, some speakers will show a photo, but too many presenters seem to think that letting the audience see a colorful version of their very linear outline is creating a "visual." The whole notion of *having* a linear outline is actually a holdover from some pretty traditional — some would argue archaic or even xenophobic — rhetorical presumptions. The sad thing is that PowerPoint offers tremendous tools for a speaker, but very, very few get past those dad-gummed bullet points.

CA: *Why did you write that "the best tactic might not be simply to add corporate 'bells and whistles' to the oratorical forms of the last century"?*

DC: I was referring to the speaker who takes that very linear outline, bullet points and all, and then uses whiz bang animation to bring the bullet points in with a really pretty color palette. That simply doesn't move the speaker out of the oratorical mode. It merely tries to mask the archaic presumptions with motion and color, which comes across as inappropriate and ineffective. The result is either an "immature" or "indecent" use of electronic communication from an oratorical worldview, or a "boring" or "limiting" form of presentation structure from a media age perspective. Neither

audience will find it to be acceptable or effective rhetoric.

CA: *Has PowerPoint had an influence on changing our presentation expectations?*

DC: I don't think PowerPoint has changed the norms, which have been on an evolutionary trend since the advent of electronic media. If anything, I think the best presenters have been the most resistant to PowerPoint because they have seen only the many bad examples. Video-editing software has actually come closer to allowing individuals to tap into the new expectations of an audience, but it hasn't been appropriate for the in-person presenter. With more powerful processing capability, which allows PowerPoint to become a vehicle for streaming video, full-speed animations, and so on, I think presenters will soon be able to integrate themselves into the sort of full-media show that audiences have come to expect.

CA: *But TV has important differences compared to media used in a live presentation environment. TV magnifies the face of the presenter, which lends itself to intimate self-disclosure; it can be viewed alone with no interaction with other people; and it is a constant flow of moving image and sound that is rarely paused. By contrast, PowerPoint or other presentation media often feature no magnification, are usually images paused in sequence to a contemplative effect, and they can serve as a springboard for conversation. In that context, wouldn't we likely see a new and unique set of rhetorical devices emerge from the intersection of oratory and digital media?*

DC: Oh absolutely. The live presenter, taking advantage of electronic tools, is in a position to provide the first real bridge from the very "literate" rhetoric that has dominated Western politics for the past few centuries to the more "oral" traditions of theater, poetry and dance. Television alone taps into some of those emotional, communal, personal reactions, but loses virtually all the advantages of reasoned discussion. We certainly don't want presenters to start to create video shows for audience members to view at their own convenience — which unfortunately has been done. There's something about the *person* of the presenter that is crucial to good collective decision-making. We might be evolving from "formal orator" to "discussion facilitator" as the model, but rhetoric still seems to require a human personality to guide people's thinking in good directions.

CA: *What needs to change in order for educators and businesspeople to begin to improve the current state of PowerPoint presentations?*

DC: Change will only come when new users of PowerPoint are able to emulate eloquent presenters. Whether those eloquent presenters are more senior speakers in the organization or teachers in their schools won't make a bit of difference. You couldn't become an orator without reciting the great speeches; you can't become an MTV host without practicing the patter. You can't become eloquent with media tools unless you have already seen their eloquent use. I've found it to be extremely difficult to locate examples of good uses of PowerPoint, and I've gone looking for them. If someone were really serious about improving practice, he or she would produce videotapes, I suppose, of good examples and distribute them to all the speech teachers in America.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com, read more articles and interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).

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