

The Elephant and Rider: Reflections on Impassivity in Professional Communication

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Writing Across the University of Alberta, 2022²
Volume 3, pp. 27-30
Published December 2022

Introduction

In *WRS 210 Introduction to Professional Communication*, the students undertake a semester-long group project to develop a communication strategy and tactics for a local nonprofit organization. At the end of this community-service learning (CSL) project, the students write a metacognitive reflection on what they learned during the semester. **Evan Martens'** reflection explores his experience learning about the importance of pathos in professional communication.

Keywords: communication, CSL, interference, persuasion, professional communication.



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² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

I once told myself, “Emotion has no place in serious communication.” “Sincerely,” I thought, “emotional rhetoric is weak rhetoric.” This mentality arose from my background in political science and philosophy. In these disciplines, furthering an argument on emotional grounds is seen as inauspicious, as if it were a way to hydrate a beached whale. I was shocked to find in professional communication, effective pathos is viewed in an entirely different light; it is seen as an asset that cultivates resonating impressions (Bray “Unit 4”). Soon, I turned away from professional communication as a whole, seeing it to be rife with manipulation and muddled irrationality. But my experience in the Community Service–Learning (CSL) project exposed a folly in this mindset. I have come to learn strong leadership is built upon a foundation of effective pathos, which can be bolstered by the so-called elephant–rider model of persuasion—an emerging way to conceptualize the goal of professional communication as both emotional and rational.

My CSL experience revealed eroding emotional consideration also erodes leadership efficacy. My direct leadership style, for example, stifled the group. Early on, I was dismissive of ideas, countering them with rationally calculated rebuttals. I do not fault myself for what ideas were dismissed, but for *how* they were dismissed. My delivery was often low–context, direct, and emotionally unyielding. I did not feel the consequences of this until two nights before the project was due; a group member approached me and expressed the view that the draft I had finished did not reflect their vision for the project. From my perspective, I had consulted them at every step; yet, here at the end, they were offering foundational (albeit excellent) ideas that I had not heard before. I was devastated. Instead of blaming that group member, I sought to apply Underwood’s communication model to analyze the breakdown (Bray “Unit 1”). The source (my group member) encoded messages throughout the term that were decoded by the receiver (myself). Vice versa, I encoded feedback that was decoded by my group member. I had to grasp that emotionality interferes in this process, and if my delivery had been too direct, even if I did not intend it to be, my message could have been decoded as dismissive or challenging. This communication interference was worsened by the fact that this group member was from a high–context culture, indicating either a tendency to reject directness on their part or a failure on mine to interpret their high–context criticism (Graves and Graves 193). In effect, my matter–of–fact tone was inconducive to fostering ideas; my group member was uncomfortable sharing their ideas with me for fear of being antagonized. And it exposed my failure to assess emotionality and its function of culture, which hindered my ability to effectively lead the group.

Recognition of this failure motivated me to revisit my conception of professional communication. Graves and Graves articulated the purpose of business communication as

persuasion (37). After CSL, I have come to realize that persuasion in a professional context is practically *sui generis*. To illustrate, consider Jonathon Haidt's elephant-rider metaphor; the elephant represents someone's emotional drive—their inclination, motivation, or bias—whereas the rider represents the rational brain (Pendleton). To persuade, you must appeal to someone's rider, but a rider will quickly lose control to an excited elephant. Academic settings generally deal with docile elephants because of the implicit set of expectations one has when they review an argument. But professional settings are far more encompassing, stylistic, and less predictable. When creating an advertisement, for example, contemplation must be made of the fact that the state of the audience's elephant is unpredictable, and a well-formed argument can be ruined by emotional predisposition (Graves and Graves 21). Thus, our group's social media posts during the CSL project needed to orient the elephant. We divided the workload so that I would write key messages and centre the rider, while another group member would create the posts. That group member selected colours, font, and imagery; when used tactfully, these elements can inspire feelings and establish credibility (Bray "Unit 7"). This process ran smoothly for the purposes of our group; however, in establishing this two-tiered model of professional persuasion, I realized I would need to develop both aspects (the message content and presentation) to succeed in future professional endeavours.

From realizing the salience of strong emotional consideration in professional communication, a problem emerged. How could I, a deadpan, emotionally relate to my audience? During CSL, I learned that this was the wrong question to ask. Instead of emotionally relating to someone, I need only to understand their emotions *in conceptu*. In other words, I need not disrupt my own elephant; I merely need to guide others' elephants. I can leverage concepts in the course to this end. In fact, I effectively employed a course technique when one of my CSL group mates did not complete their work by a deadline. At first, I wanted to directly tell them outright that they needed to get it done. I instead used a buffer statement. My approach was informed by research on positive and negative framing that suggests acceptance of a message is more closely associated with its degree of emotionality, not the content of the message itself (Rocklage). Having learned this, I sought to buffer my approach to the group member with goodwill statements. I first asked them how their week had been and how they were feeling about the assignment. This implicitly made my group mate have a positive disposition toward me, as predicted by the course technique (Graves and Graves 220). Unprompted, the group member told me why they did not meet this deadline and that they were working towards rectifying the situation. This was a eureka moment. Based on experience, I was fully expecting a confrontation, maybe even having to do their work for them. Instead, the moment passed graciously, and we both left with a smile.

What I have come to learn is that emotional consideration is inalienable from the concept of professional communication. By virtue of that fact, effective pathos is explicitly linked to success in the field. Further, those like me who generally view themselves as unempathetic have a chance to succeed in professional communications through recognition of the proposed elephant-rider model. My reflection on this further sparked my personal interest in parsing the difference between emotional *persuasion* and emotional *manipulation*, which is a broader conversation that may require an interdisciplinary approach. But what I wish to impart to you, the reader, is that you cannot ignore the elephant in the room.

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