FOR A NEW AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Presidential Address, December 1974
Samuel L. Becker

In the late 1960's this Association like many other professional associations was shocked into self-examination. The consequences were positive. Though we still have some distance to go, more influential positions were opened to younger members of the profession, to women, and to members of minority groups; and there was increasing concern for socially relevant and socially responsible research and teaching. In the 1970's, undoubtedly, the press will be toward providing new kinds of services, kinds long associated with labor unions. And if the poor economic situation and the drop in enrollments in schools and colleges continue or even worsen over the period of a decade or more, as many economists and demographers now predict, this press too will be impossible to resist. Like the changes of the sixties, these changes in our Association and in the educational enterprise in general, will probably be good. However, with the benefits which can accrue may come a loss which renders our gains meaningless. This is the loss of belief in and pursuit of learning and of excellence.

There are already some ominous signs. One is the increasing interest of the academic radical in forming unions rather than reforming scholarship, and the greater concern for how to teach and to whom to teach, than for what to teach. These trends have been well-documented in Harland and Sue Bloland's recent study, *American Learned Societies in Transition*,[1] in which they conclude that scholarly values are receding. The increasing threats to financial and professional security are attracting teachers more to collective bargaining than to collective or even individual pursuit of knowledge; the financial distress of most educational institutions and the influx of new kinds of students or new mixes of students are forcing greater attention on the organization and methods of teaching so that more, and more varied, students can be taught with fewer faculty members. The Blolands, like many educational administrators, seem little concerned with the loss of traditional scholarly values; they apparently believe these values to be no longer important for teachers, that quality teaching and quality scholarship are separable.

There is a saying in the *Talmud*, the compilation of the oral laws of the Jews, that "the man who learns but does not teach is like the myrtle in the desert; no one profits from it." It seems to me equally true that the man who teaches but does not learn is like the quicksand in the desert; he is a deceptive threat to all who depend upon him for firm and helpful footing. If, in our just concerns for social reformation and for self-preservation, we lose this keystone of the academic enterprise—the pursuit of learning and of excellence—we will have lost all. We will have brought the young and women and minority group members into an institution which has no value; we will have robbed students of the opportunities for growth and development that they need; we will have destroyed the base that a great society needs.

We in the field of communication have a special responsibility here. Human communication has always been a difficult business. One of the great tragedies in our civilization is that we have so little understanding of each other; despite all of our talk, despite all of our highly motivated media of communication, despite the variety of communicative forms that we use—from drama to billboards to radio commercials to sensitivity groups or brainstorming sessions to debate and discussion—effective human communication is too seldom achieved. This is the major challenge to our field; this is our major responsibility. Any teacher or student of communication who is not devoting a reasonable amount of time to trying to understand communication better so that he or she can contribute to the improvement of it is not fulfilling the responsibility which is each of ours.

I realize that advocating scholarship is not popular these days, and hence I may be accused of demeaning the importance of teaching. But that is nonsense!

Dedication to scholarship is not antithetical to dedication to teaching; teaching and scholarship must be inextricably intertwined throughout the educational enterprise unless we are satisfied to be teachers and have teachers who are but "keepers and drillmasters and friendly companions."[2] There is a constructive historic trend in most academic disciplines: what is taught in graduate school to one generation moves to the undergraduate in the next generation or two, to secondary schools in the next and, to some extent and in some disciplines, to the primary schools in the next. The rate of this movement varies from discipline to discipline, but seems inexorable in all. We teachers have a responsibility to facilitate and even to push this downward movement, to make ourselves, as we exist at any moment, expendable in the process of education. One implication of this responsibility is that we must change ourselves through the acquisition of new learning and new knowledge—new methods, new applications, new theory—so what becomes expendable is what we are and do today, not our roles as teachers and scholars. A second implication is that, at least at some levels of education, and one would hope at all, we must be constantly developing new or improved theory and applications and methods to support the human quest for continual development.

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1974 SCA LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SUMMARY MINUTES 60th ANNIVERSARY MEETING

Chicago, Illinois December 27-30, 1974
Presiding: Samuel L. Becker
Parliamentarian: Gregg Phifer

Council Members Present at One or More Sessions—With the Number of Sessions Attended Indicated: R. R. Allen (4), Malthon N. Anapol (4), Kenneth Andersen (5), Betty Anderson (5), James R. Andrews (4), Carroll C. Arnold (3), Ruth Arrington (5), Wallace A. Bacon (5), Samuel L. Becker (5), David Berg (2), Roy Berko (3), Dawne Bernhardt (3), Lloyd F. Bitzer (4), John W. Bowers, (2), Bernard J. Brommel (3), Carolyn R. Calloway (4), Herman Cohen (5), Norma C. Cook (5), Robert E. Davis (3), Judith Espinola (5), Barbara A. Ewbank (5), Don F. Faules (5), Carmendale Fernandes (4), Walter R. Fisher (4), Ken Fountain (4), Kenneth Frandsen (4), Dwight L. Freshley (4), Kathleen Galvin (2), George Gunkel (5), Robert N. Hall (4), Robert Heimerl (5), Linda R. Heun (5), Mary Ann Holden (5), Kathleen M. Jamieson (4), Robert C. Jeffrey (2), Lucy Keele (4), Patrick C. Kennicott (4), Robert D. Kully (4), Calvin M. Logue (5), Clarice P. Lowe (2), Don Marine (2), Ronald J. Matlon (5), James C. McCroskey (4), Charlotte F. Mclain (5), Keith Mielke (2), Gerald R. Miller (3), G. P. Mohrmann (4), P. Judson Newcombe (4), Thomas R. Nilsen (5), Marcella Oberle (5), Robert L. Overstreet (5), James A. Patterson (3), Sharon A. Ratcliffe (5), Donus D. Roberts (3), Mary M. Roberts (5), Linda Romigh (5), Thomas M. Scheidel (2), Robert Scott (5), Herbert W. Simons (2), Thomas O. Sloan (1), Hermann G. Stelzner (4), Anita Taylor (5), Carol Taylor (4), Beverly Whitaker (2), Larry Wilder (1), Darlyn Wolvin (3), William Work (5).

Note: Members wishing additional information about matters mentioned in these minutes are encouraged to seek same by communicating with the appropriate officer, editor or chairperson. (See rosters in the February issue.) For help in routing inquiries, please contact Executive Secretary William Work, SCA, Statler Hilton Hotel, New York, NY 10001.

Friday, December 27—Morning Session

President Becker called the meeting to order at 9:45 a.m. and asked for nominations for the Council representative to the 1974 Nominating Committee. Subsequently, R. R. Allen was named to the post by acclamation.

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The field of communication has probably not been so successful at this continual development as some other fields have been—most notably physics and chemistry and, to a lesser extent, mathematics and political science. If we had been as successful as we should have been, communication training today would be so well-developed in the secondary and primary schools that only the rare secondary school graduate would need more training at preparing and delivering a speech, participating in discussion, or writing an acceptable essay. The basic methods of analyzing a speech or essay would be well known by all college undergraduates, if not by all high school students. An assortment of communication and rhetorical theories would be part of the intellectual tools of any bright high school graduate—or at least of the college sophomore—who wishes to understand his social environment.

In order to facilitate this downward thrust of knowledge and skill in our field, we must develop more press from the top, press caused by the sheer weight or mass of knowledge being developed. Were that mass greater, we would be searching for means to insure that our graduate students acquired it and would probably discover only two practical ways; one would be to re-organize and synthesize as much of the knowledge as we could in order to reduce redundancy and to eliminate what is least relevant, and the other would be to enable students to learn more of it before they enter graduate school. The entire process would be repeated at the undergraduate level, then at the secondary level, the primary level, and finally in the pre-school and home.

All of this, of course, presupposes certain scholarly values—values which we must struggle to maintain in the academy, or perhaps even to develop further.

It is because of this need for maintenance of our scholarly values that we in the field of communication must think about who we are, what our field encompasses, and what our central intellectual core is. Research on the sociology of knowledge has demonstrated clearly the importance of one's scholarly community to the values one holds and the commitments one has. Since the Age of Enlightenment, we have recognized that if enlightenment is to be more than sporadic and lackadaisical—even accidental—it must be a cooperative venture, a community affair.[3] The acceptance of core values and conceptions will not restrict creative or innovative scholarship. Quite the opposite. They will give support to such scholarship by reducing the probability of individual scholars being forced to work in isolation, without the intellectual stimulation and support of a community of which they are parts. The increasing fragmentation of our field with the consequent decrease in intellectual ground on which we can stand together and develop, poses threats to our continued existence and, even more important, to the contributions we can make to knowledge. (This problem of fragmentation, of course, is not our field's alone; it is a problem in the entire academic community and in the larger intellectual community of which the academy is only a part. Intellectuals have become so fragmented that we have no common ground for discourse, no common base from which to cooperatively attack and resolve the problems facing our society. Working toward a core or set of cores for our field is a major step toward decreasing the fragmentation in these larger communities.)

I do not mean to suggest that there is something sacred or inviolable about the present organization of our field—of our departments, schools, colleges, and universities. I am not advocating that all of us stay wedded to the same academic mates until death do us part, though it does seem that some of us may be rushing out of wedlock without sufficient thought. I am suggesting rather that, so long as we remain bedfellows, we *use* all that we can find or conceive that we have in common in order to build a maximum of social and intellectual support for our teaching and research. The hasty fragmentation of our field is too often unnecessary and counterproductive, just as the separation between teacher and scholar that occurs often these days is unnecessary and counterproductive. This separation and fragmentation produce a tension that hinders rather than supports our work. There is also counterproductive tension in our field, as in many fields, among the humanists, the social scientists, and the technologists, each of whom is convinced too often that *his* or *her* methods or approaches are the most important means of resolving communication problems. It will help us to reduce these tensions if we remind ourselves that the most important element in resolving problems—in developing fruitful theoretical ideas and fruitful practice—has little to do with research method or materials; it has to do rather with creative imagination. Seldom, if ever, does a fresh theoretical idea come logically out of our research findings or out of the existence of a technology. The fresh idea comes from the workings of a mind which *uses* the findings of research or scholarship or the knowledge of technology as stimuli; the idea represents an imaginative leap beyond those stimuli. Data—whether numbers or tidbits of information from diaries or speeches or the texts of plays or shots from a film or television program—do not advance knowledge in any meaningful sense. Knowledge is advanced when a creative mind perceives a new relationship, a new order where others saw only the old order or only chaos. The kinds of data obtainable from all our methods of scholarship are important for the maximum stimulation of our imaginations and for the communication of our visions. Similarly, interaction of the varied kinds of thinking that are characteristic of the best scholars working with each of these methods—the critical, the historical, the scientific, and the various amalgams of them all—can stimulate us to new and more useful visions, to different ways of looking at the phenomena of communication so that our minds and sensibilities perceive new relationships and new and useful generalizations. Of course, the existence of fresh frames of reference alone will not lead us to new perceptions; our minds and our sensibilities must be open to them. We must take the cue from physicist Robert Oppenheimer who suggested that

> When a friend tells us of a new discovery we may not understand, we may not be able to listen without jeopardizing the work that is ours and closer to us; but we cannot find in a book or canon—and we should not seek—grounds for hallowing our ignorance. If a man tells us that he sees differently than we, or that he finds beautiful what we find ugly, we may have to leave the room from fatigue or trouble; but that is our weakness and our default. If we must live with a perpetual sense that the world and the men in it are greater than we and too much for us; let it be the measure of our virtue that we know this and seek no comfort. Above all, let us not proclaim that the limits of our powers correspond to some special wisdom in our choice of life, of learning, or of beauty.[4]

Too often, as Oppenheimer suggests, we don't permit new thoughts or visions to enter our minds; we find it more comfortable to perceive everything in the old framework—to look only for what is the same, rather than for what might be different. There are those, for example, who look at contemporary black drama and see nothing new—and, at one level of abstraction, there is nothing new. One can find ways to describe most Black drama with an Aristotelian analytical scheme just about as easily as one can describe a Greek or Elizabethan play with such a scheme. But that scheme does not help us to perceive all that is possible to perceive in that Black drama. Just so, the concept of "thromises"—a combination of threat and promise often present when people conflict—which John Bowers recently wrote about in *Speech Monographs*[5] is easily perceived as subsumed by game theory or even by stimulus-response learning theory. Perceiving the concept those ways undoubtedly makes the perceiver more comfortable, however, it reduces the probability that the concept will stimulate him to perceive some different kinds of generalizations about human conflict and, perhaps, even fresh means for reducing conflicts. I assume that all who ever thought about rhetorical activity in any way recognized that it goes on in some situation, but not until Lloyd Bitzer thoroughly developed an interesting conception of the "rhetorical situation"[6] were we stimulated to see rhetoric in some fresh ways and to begin to ask some fresh and useful questions about it.

Becker, *cont. from page 11*

The concepts and theoretical ideas which truly form the core of our field should be ones that lead us to new and useful communication forms and new and useful frames of reference such as these. I wish that I could report today that I have found during this past year the major core concepts and theoretical ideas for our field. I have not. However, I want to share with you a few of the thoughts that have come to me as I have worried about the problem. I hope these thoughts will suggest some of the existing sorts of questions to be found at the heart of our field and, even more important, that they will stimulate some of you who are more imaginative than I am to develop even more important and critical concepts and ideas about the core of our field.

In searching for the locus of our common core, I was stirred again—as I have been many times in the past—by the late Walter Lippman whose legacy to our field has been incalculable. More than half a century ago, Lippman wrote about "the world outside and the pictures in our heads."[7] He argued persuasively that to understand human behavior we must understand not man's external environment but, rather, that "pseudo-environment" he has made for himself inside his head to which his behavior is a response. This conception of Lippman's is relevant to a very large portion of the problems with which we in communication are concerned. Nevertheless, we see little effort to draw out its implications or to work cooperatively on finding answers to the common questions which it suggests.

The processes by which individuals form these pictures in their heads must be fundamental to the concerns of all of us. They involve the ways in which individuals process information from what they hear and read and see and what they sense in other ways, the ways in which they perceive meanings in those data, and the ways in which they integrate those meanings into their conceptual schemes. If we are trying to learn or help others learn to analyze speeches or poems or plays or films in various ways; if we are trying to understand the role of communication in political processes, in judicial processes, or in conflict resolution; if we are trying to understand the effects of mass communication on children or ways to improve the flow of communication in an office or a school system a fruitful theory of the ways in which people process information is vital. I have suggested elsewhere some of the ways in which this theory can be approached,[8] all of us in communication have a common stake in its development.

A special aspect of information processing that is especially relevant to all parts of our field and, hence, seems to me to be a core problem, is the way or ways in which communication conventions change. Anyone who has observed the shifts through the years in the gestures and language which are considered conventional for political speakers, or the constantly evolving conventions of theatrical staging, or the change in editing conventions in film and television during the past decade or two, is aware that our conventions rarely if ever remain constant. However, I have discovered no generalizations which will help us to understand *why* these occur or *when* they will occur so that, as communicators, we can cope with them more effectively.

Another concept that appears to have rich possibilities for helping us to understand these matters is the concept of structure. As you know, of course, scholars in a great variety of fields have developed many conceptions of structure, but the relationship among these conceptions—if one exists—is far from clear. It is not clear, for example, if there is a relationship between the structuralist views of the linquist, the anthropologist, the cognitive psychologist, the physiologist, and the literary or film critic. What *is* reasonably clear is that structure, in some senses at least, plays an important role in communication. As Karl Pribram noted in his exciting book on *Languages of the Brain,* for example,

> Research on the conditions that influence human memory has demonstrated the overriding importance of questions of configuration; whether something is remembered is in large part a function of the form and context in which it is experienced.[9]

In other words, the creation of the worlds in our heads is dependent upon two types of structures, the structures that we sense and the structuring that we do, or, in other terms, message structures and perceptual structures. Though the distinctions are somewhat ambiguous between message and perception, or structures that we sense and structuring that we do, these concepts help us to perceive communication in some fresh and useful ways. One of my former students, Joseph Anderson, has even suggested that further insights can be stimulated if we break both message structures and perceptual structures down further. He thinks that we might divide message structures into conventional and idiosyncratic; and perceptual structures into archetypal, cultural, and personality structures—or, perhaps, anatomical, physiological, and psychological. However we divide them, he believes it can be useful to think of communication as what occurs at the interface of perceptual and message structures; that is, at the interface of structures that we sense and the structures with which we integrate them to reshape the pictures in our heads. Approaching communication in this way may help us to discover strategies for better tailoring instructional materials to the needs of individual students, for preparing ourselves and others for more efficient reading and listening. Understanding the interaction between message and perceptual structures may lead to ideas for sharply reducing the misunderstandings generated by many of the messages we emit. It should definitely help us to achieve more reliable intercultural communication.

The perceptual structures we carry about with us are not static, of course. Some change rapidly; some change slowly; some apparently change little if at all. The concept of perceptual structure appears to be closely related to convention of expectation, perhaps, in some senses, they are identical. Consider the way in which individuals sometimes make sense out of what may appear to be random stimuli, while at other times they perceive no sense at all in those stimuli. For example, for many years we believed that there were certain principles of film editing that could not be violated or the film would be meaningless. However, when some of the old principles of film editing *have* been violated—principles whose violation was supposed to render a film sequence meaningless or confusing for an audience—such as a jump cut—we found that most members of the audience were not confused at all and had little difficulty in creating a meaning. As a matter of fact, it now appears that it may be impossible to create a meaningless film. To some degree, that is also true of theatre. It is less true of discussion, public speaking, conversation, radio, or television, probably because conventions are so much better learned for these forms—our expectations so much more set and rigid. At one time, I thought that the difference between forms which could be perceived as meaningless and those which could not be was due to the former's dependence on language, the argument being that linguistic structure is so well learned —perhaps even innate to some degree as Chomsky and others have postulated—that any form of communication depending strongly on language can be rendered meaningless for most people by violating the grammar and syntax. However, as soon as one thinks of poetry, this generalization breaks down too. Linquistic rules can be totally ignored and, so long as the reader or listener believes that it is poetry he is being exposed to, one can present random words and he will tend to perceive meaning. Given the same stimuli without the expectation of poetry, but rather the expectation of rhetorical discourse, the reader or listener will perceive no meaning. This interaction of prior learning and expectations may provide a key to many of the communication questions which are yet unanswered.

The interaction of learning and expectation is part of the other concept that I want to suggest as at or related to the core of our communication interests. It is a concept that has been considered in only a very shallow way by most of the teachers and scholars in our field, except for those in mass communication. This is the concept of function. In much of our scholarship and our teaching we have often analyzed the purpose of some piece of discourse and then asked how it worked, how its parts con-

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tribute to its purpose or functions, how its parts or the whole contribute to its purpose being achieved with an audience. In the latter case, our generalizations have not been very precise; we seem unable to account for much of the variability among communication situations or, even more important, among people. I suggest that much of this lack of precision is due to our failure to consider the fact that there is seldom a common purpose among all of the participants in a communication transaction. Mass communication scholars have provided ample evidence demonstrating that the same message or the same communication transaction serves quite different functions for different individuals. However, these scholars have not yet developed very imaginative ways to get at these functions and their antecedents. If we can improve upon the methods that now exist, there are a great many critical problems which we might be able to resolve.

1. It should help us to explain the differences in reaction to a conflict situation since much conflict—whether within a group, between students and administrators, or members of a family—undoubtedly serves different functions for the different persons involved.
2. It could help us to explain differences in student development in our courses, since being in school or college is perceived by different individuals to serve different functions.
3. Some information itself has been found to serve different functions for different people. Understanding these functions should help us to understand and develop better means for increasing the comprehension and retention of messages.
4. The process of exposure to communication serves different functions; people go to hear speeches or read the newspaper or watch television for different purposes. As a well-informed citizenry becomes more vital to our continued existence, so that we must find means to motivate more people to expose themselves to certain kinds of communication, it is obvious that we must attempt to understand these motivating functions.
5. One of the problems which has plagued scholars for the past two or three decades and has inhibited the synthesis of much of the research in our field is the apparent discrepancy between the findings of laboratory studies of communication and field observations of communication. It seems likely to me that at least part of the explanation for this discrepancy is the fact that student "volunteers" or "draftees" for the laboratory studies probably perceive the communication situation in the study to serve different functions for them than the communication situations in which they participate outside the laboratory. If we can determine the differences in these perceptions more precisely, and their relationship to communication behavior, we should be able to pull the findings from these varied studies together into more coherent and useful generalizations.
6. A better understanding of the functions which any given communication situation will serve for an individual could contribute to more precise generalizations about the credibility he attributes to others in each situation, to the way individuals carry out their various information gatekeeping roles, to the way in which they respond to works of art, and to the way in which they work together in groups to resolve problems or make decisions.

In short, for all of the kinds of communication that we study and teach about, we need to ask how the participants perceive the functions of the situation and why they perceive them as they do—or, in Walter Lippman's terms, what and why is that world in their heads?

I have not been suggesting that the further development of theoretical ideas about information processing and functional analysis will provide solutions to all of the communication problems that we have. I am suggesting, rather, that they are two which appear to hold promise for providing *some* solutions. I am suggesting also that these are examples of the wide range of concepts that we need to give us multiple ways of perceiving and of studying communication. And I am suggesting that these are concepts which can form part of the common core of our field. Cooperative thinking and research on them by the various sorts of teacher/scholars in our field can help us to achieve a richer and more rapid understanding of all aspects of communication.

In arguing for some concepts which form a common core for our field and for concerted exploration of these concepts by the varied sorts of scholars in our field, I am not arguing that all of us accept the same methods or approaches to knowing. A volume of studies was published last month in honor of my friend and colleague and former president of this Association, Donald Bryant. Its title is *Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition.*[10] In it, I noted that ours appears to be a transitional period for rhetorical study—and I might well have said for all communication study—but that an examination of the history of our field shows that it has always appeared to be in transition—we have been both a humanistic discipline and a behavioral science virtually from the inception of the field. Our "transitional" state does not seem to be very transitory, and I believe that to be a good thing. The tension that these competing modes of thinking creates can be a healthy tenson, if we use it in productive rather than destructive ways, if we use it for furthering our deeper and fuller understanding of the critical problems of communication that man faces.

Notes

1. Malcolm G. Scully, "Disestablishmentarianism?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* October 21, 1974, p. 11. This is a review of Harland G. and Sue M. Bloland's *American Learned Societies in Transition: The Impact of Dissent and Recession* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).
2. Charles A. Fenton, "The Sweet, Sad Song of the Devoted College Teacher," *AAUP Bulletin,* Winter, 1956, p. 363.
3. The transition in the eighteenth century from the isolated scholar to the idea of a community of scholars is discussed in detail by Charles Frankel in *The Faith of Reason, The Idea of Progress in the French Enlightenment* (New York: King's Crown Press, Columbia University, 1948.).
4. Robert Oppenheimer, *The Open Mind.* Quoted in *News Digest,* the newsletter of the Fund for Adult Education, February 1, 1960, p. 1.
5. John Waite Bowers, "Beyond Threats and Promises," "*Speech Monographs,* 41 (1974), ix-xi.
6. Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 1 (1968), 1-14.
7. Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), chapter one.
8. Samuel L. Becker, "Toward an Appropriate Theory for Contemporary Speech Communications," in *What Rhetoric (Communication Theory) is Appropriate for Contemporary Speech Communication?* ed. David H. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1969), pp. 9-25; and "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World," in *The Prospect of Rhetoric,* ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 21-43.
9. Karl H. Pribram, *Languages of the Brain* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 66.
10. Walter R. Fisher, ed., *Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974).

DEADLINES

Copy for June Spectra, April 15
Copy for Talk-Back, April 15
Call for Summer Institutes, April 15
May Placement Bulletin Listings, April 25
Invitations to host International Debate Teams, May 15
June Placement Bulletin Listings, May 26
Return 1975-76 Directory Information Forms, June 1
August Spectra, June 15
ADASC Seminar Preregistrations, July 1
SCA Summer Conference Preregistrations, July 3

J. L. Hofford, Speech Communication, Boston State College, 174 Ipswich St., Boston, MA 02115 seeks research information on the verbal and non-verbal interpersonal communication of love.