ISSA Proceedings 1998 – The Usefulness Of Platitudes In Arguments About Conduct

Excerpt from a School Board Election Debate

We need leaders who will listen and work with parents, teachers and administrators to provide the best possible education for our kids. Our children should always be the focus of our efforts, not Board behavior. Imagine the possibilities if we could tap the vision of every concerned parent, teacher and citizen to come up with a school system that reflects the best of all tha- that all of us have to offer. Sounds better than fighting with each other doesn't it? In elections for public office, a candidate's record of conduct will influence how citizens vote. Whether consideration of conduct (i.e., character, personality, communicative style) is reasonable and should affect citizens' votes, or whether it should not, is neither an easy judgment call nor one about which involved parties usually agree. As a consequence, making arguments about others' conduct can be delicate business. The purpose of this paper is to take a close look at one community's arguments about conduct. The site: A school board election in a medium-sized school district in the Western United States. In this election that set records for voter turn out and spending, candidates did not agree as to what were (or should be) the focal issues. Incumbents considered substantive concerns about directions for education as the main issue; the non-incumbents considered process problems – how school board members had been and should be conducting themselves in making decisions – to be the main issue. The election resulted in a decisive victory for the non-incumbents.**[i]** As the local newspaper proclaimed in a front page quote from one victorious challenger: "I think this election result really sends a message that rudeness is something people don't want to see in local officials."**[ii]**

After providing background on the school district, the materials, and some key events that preceded the election, I focus on the debate that occurred among the seven candidates. In particular, I show that the non-incumbents' arguments as to why they should be elected (and the incumbents defeated) were heavily reliant on platitudes about conduct. Platitudes, I claim, are useful, perhaps even necessary

conversational devices, when a candidate is criticizing a fellow candidate's conduct. They assign responsibility without explicitly so doing, they evoke particular events for an audience yet do not explicate how a person's handling of the event was inappropriate, and they minimize the likelihood of counter charges.

Rocky Mountain School District's School Board

Rocky Mountain School District serves a population of a quarter of a million people. Its main city of roughly 100,000 is the home of a research university that educates a good number of the teachers and administrators that staff its schools. The district is geographically diverse, including not only the university city that is the hub, but bedroom suburbs of the city, and difficult-to-reach mountain towns. Twenty-five thousand children attend its 54 different schools. School board meetings are open to the public, occur twice a month, and are broadcast on a local public channel. Meeting involve school board members, the superintendent, the school system's attorney and other school district officials, as well as members of the public. The Board is comprised of seven members elected for four year terms, with half of the board up for election every two years. Following each election, the Board selects its president and other officers. In the November 1997 election that is the focus of this paper four positions were at stake with seven candidates running (one district had an uncontested election). Although candidates were required to live in the district from which they ran, citizens voted in every district's contest.

Materials and Method

The focal materials for this analysis were (1) transcription of the locally broadcast election debate (two hours), (2) transcription of two meeting segments in which the board crafted a conduct policy for itself, and (3) news articles, editorials, and campaign ads about the election that occurred in the major local newspaper. In addition to the focal materials, the analysis is informed by two years of observation, note-taking, recording of meetings, and newspaper clipping. Data include about 200 hours of videotaped meetings,**[iii]** extensive notes about most meetings, and an archive of articles and letters from the local newspaper. The debate and meetings were transcribed simply; attention was given to capturing exact words, word repairs, phrase restarts, vocalized particles (uhm, uh), but not to vocal intonation, pausing or turn timing. In analyzing the materials I use action-implicative discourse analysis, an ethnographicallyinformed type of talk/textual analysis that seeks to understand the problems in a communicative

practice and the conversational strategies that reflect and manage the practice's problems (see Tracy, 1995).**[iv]**

Key Events Preceding the 1997 Election

In 1995, Helene Stetson,**[v]** who two years earlier had campaigned on a back to basics and educational excellence platform, was selected as the new board president. Interpreting the results of the '95 election as evidence of the public's desire for change, Stetson launched a series of high visibility changes. Included among the changes that the Stetson board instituted were :

(1) "Demotion" of the then superintendent. The superintendent's seat at board meetings was moved off the central dais to a lower side table; several months later he resigned and was replaced by an acting superintendent who unexpectedly retired at the end of the next year.

(2) The appointment of a new superintendent and district budget director who had no experience in public schools. The superintendent had been a military officer and the budget director had worked for business;

(3) Adding a world literature course to graduation requirements despite the affected high school teachers voting 75-2 against the requirement;**[vi]**

(4) changing the middle school program from its recently adopted team teaching approach (which required teacher coordination time) back to an earlier junior high model;

(5) facilitating rapid expansion of alternative schools within the public school system. A recently passed state law required school districts to develop alternative schools; however, school districts were varying considerably in how quickly they were implementing the policy; and

(6) the mid-year "promotion/firing" of the principal in the district's largest high school. This person went on to campaign against Stetson in the 1997 election. Votes at Board meetings in the 1995-97 time period frequently split into a majority and a minority with the same people in each group.

In addition to these policy and personnel changes, during this time period there had been an unsuccessful recall petition aimed at Stetson that had been signed by two of the three "minority" Board members who often voted as a bloc, a resignation mid-term of the other minority Board member who had a reputation as fair-minded and reasonable, and the appointment by the local newspaper of a 13-person "Citizens' Task Force" to deliberate about "The Schools We Want." The second report, issued in September 1997, 18 months after the task force had been

convened and a month before the election, was critical of the school board. Communication, the task force argued, needed to be a top priority. To be a "successful and widely respected school system" attention needed to be given to "establishing significantly better communications internally and externally."**[vii]** Board meetings during the Stetson presidency frequently occurred in packed rooms where attending citizen booed and applauded. As a result of the high level of expressiveness at meetings, the Board introduced the following statement as a preface to public participation:

Participation Preface
We are glad to hear from the public and look forward to receiving your comments. The Board has unanimously resolved, however, that it cannot tolerate personal attacks upon Board members, administrators, teachers or staff. We must all encourage and insist upon a more civil public discourse.**[viii]**
A year into the Stetson presidency, The Board had an all-day retreat with a facilitator, the purpose of which was to reflect about its own processes. Following the retreat, the Board passed a conduct policy in the hope of improving its collective behavior. In reviewing the policy to be voted on, the Board member (a majority member) who had drafted the policy said, "this is our best effort so far of what we can do and how we can get along and I think it's a great role model for the whole community in civic discourse, civil discourse." The conduct policy included ten commitments.

Rocky Mountain School District's Conduct Policy
1. Be respectful of one another; address issues rather than personalities.
2. Attempt to be clear and concise in comments.
3. Admit mistakes.
4. Share information and avoid surprises.
5. Keep confidences among board members. Act ethically and responsibly. Keep confidential the discussions held in closed session.
6. Use our best efforts to bring people together rather than push them apart.
7. Recognize that consensus is a majority opinion.**[ix]**
8. Support presentation of both sides of issues by staff and committees.
9. When a major decision has been made, agree to a time in the future to review the decision and leave further discussion until that time.
10. Encourage communications which enhance mutual understanding and provide for mutual support; involve taxpayers, parents, teachers, and administrators in

the decision-making process where appropriate.

With the exception of Principle 7, there was little disagreement. All Board members agreed on the importance of being ethical, consulting with others to make decisions, speaking respectfully, avoiding personal attack, and so on. Simply put, the Board's conduct policy was a set of platitudes – insipid, banal remarks with which no one on this Board, or in most American communities, was likely to disagree.

In argument terms, I would define platitudes as abstract, noncontentious policy/value claims that do not engage with, or specify, particular persons, actions, and choices. One important use of platitudes is to create a sense that the group is largely in agreement. That formulating a proposal abstractly will engender more agreement than the "same" proposal at a more concrete level has long been recognized. For instance, in a widely cited study, 95% of Americans were found to agree with the statement, "I believe in free speech for all, no matter what view." At the same time, large numbers of these ordinary citizens also agreed with statements that advocated book banning or prohibiting certain kinds of expression (McClosky, 1964). An upshot of the gap between abstract and concrete proposals is that agreement at an abstract level says little about whether agreement will be forthcoming when the topic gets specific. Applying this generalization to the Rocky Mountain Board, it seems likely that it was only because the Board avoided discussing what counted as respectful treatment of people (#1) or what involving teachers in decision-making (#10) meant, that it was able to achieve agreement about conduct. That the Board's agreement was a veneer overlaying deep opinion differences as to what was reasonable Board behavior became visible during the election.

In the 1997 election, Stetson and two other majority Board members (one of whom was the person appointed mid-term to replace the Board member who resigned) were running for re-election. In addition, there was an uncontested seat in a district where a minority member was retiring and the new candidate had expressed the intent of carrying forward many of the minority member's positions.

From the outset the election was seen as two slates rather than seven distinct candidates. The four challengers were running as a bloc against the three incumbents. An ad the day before the election epitomized this division. Under a large ballot box with checks next to the names of the four challengers were the

names of “819 current and past teachers, staff, and administrators” of “the Rocky Mountain School District community**[x]** ” supporting the non-incumbents.

The Election Debate

The election debate, a two hour event sponsored by the League of Women Voters and occurring a month before the election, required the seven candidates to make brief opening and closing statements (90 seconds), and to field unrehearsed questions. Questions asked candidates to delineate the role of teachers and Board members in curriculum development, whether Board members should be on personnel search committees, their views about site-based management, class size, and the district’s diversity goal, to provide a few examples.

Candidates’ opening statements tended to include information about who a candidate was, evidence of the candidate’s commitment to public education, and an implicit proposal as to what the primary issue(s) should be for election. Consider what Board President Stetson said:

Stetson (Speaker 4)**[xi]**

This is a good school district. It can be a great school district. What we have to do is try to make some of the changes though in some of the basics that are delivered to our children as well as some of those that aren’t basic. We need to improve vocational education. We need to make sure our children can spell and punctuate, that they know grammar and history, that they understand math and can do simple math calculations without a calculator. We need to make sure that our children are the best prepared that they can be for the next century. This is not about teachers, this is not about parents and taxpayers. But this is about children, and I am an advocate for children. Thank You.

Stetsen’s opening statement frames key election issues to be about education policies: improving the quality of vocational education, schools giving more attention to spelling and grammar, and so on. To the degree she attends to conduct it is embedded in her final comment that the election is not about “teachers, parents and taxpayers” but about “children.” No orientation to conduct as an issue is seen in the second member of the majority bloc’s opening comment. Like Stetson, Draper frames the election as being about educational policy issues.

Draper (Speaker 6)

We have made significant gains in the following areas: raised academic standards for all students, increased time teachers spend with each student, we’ve confronted the Middle School controversy, we’ve started to reduce class size,

we've made the budget understandable, we've used existing space more wisely, we've regained financial credibility. Personally, my goals are to improve student achievement, and also to promote accountability. I believe I am headed in the right direction, and I Ruth Draper ask to be retained on the Board.

The most direct acknowledgment that conduct was an issue was seen in the opening comment from the majority member who had crafted the Board's conduct policy. After highlighting some of the things she had accomplished as Board treasurer, Kingston said,

Kingston (Speaker 1)
No more fads, such as Open Space classrooms, will occur which cost millions to correct. Decisions need to be made with more collaboration. Participants must work together towards common understandings. All must listen to learn and to realize that we all have pieces of the puzzle and together we can make the complete picture. I have led the Board toward working together in productive ways. Results include the Board Protocol agreement and unanimously agreed upon visions and goals.

Kingston's statement implicates that tension and disagreement have occurred. Her formulations ("all must listen" "all have pieces of the puzzle"), though, imply that all parties (parents, teachers, administrators, Board members) have contributed to the difficulties. Strikingly different are the opening statements of the challenging candidates. Of note is that all challengers referenced Board conduct as a major concern. Each candidate offered platitudes about generally desirable conduct that, because of the larger context soon to be elaborated, became a speech action that was a strong indictment of incumbent communicative behavior. I label the rhetorical move that challengers used "platitudes plus" to highlight its dependence on the existence of a context of a particular type.

(Speaker 2)
I believe in high academic standards, inclusivity of our experts in decision making and accountability on all levels with the Board setting the standards. I believe it is the Board's responsibility to model the behaviors we are expecting from the community. We are a community divided in this debate, and it does not have to be this way. As a Board member I will model the behaviors which I expect from the community: leadership, cooperation, listening, seeing the big picture, educational

excellence and problem solving. We have to consider the messages we are giving our young people when we behave in ways that create divisions in the community. This election is not only about educational excellence, it is about leadership excellence.

(Speaker 5)
The School Board must model responsible leadership. I'll listen to others and work cooperatively to achieve consensus on controversial issues. This November you have a choice. You can vote to change the School Board's focus to creating opportunities for kids in the classroom or vote to keep the focus on Board behavior.

(Speaker 7)
We have a good school district, we've always had a good school district, and I want to bring my experiences, my common sense, my ability to make good decisions to this School Board, because I think it will help improve the Board, the Board process. In none of these three opening statement is the speaker clear how the current Board members have acted inappropriately. That the speakers regard something as problematic is cued by vague references to "creating divisions in the community," the election being about "leadership excellence" (Speaker 2), changing the focus from "Board behavior" (Speaker 5) and "Board process" (Speaker 7). In contrast to these three candidates, Speaker 3, the ex-high school principal, was less vague in her negative assessment.

(Speaker 3)
I am running for the Board to bring balance and cooperation, a climate of civility, better communication, and a sense of service back to Board practices. Board operations should not be a battleground of win-lose. Our communities deserve better…. There is no trust between the teachers and this Board. And without trust, there is no commitment. We are not going forward, and compared to other excellent districts, they call our efforts pathetic. With a School Board that the teachers and communities can trust to work cooperatively and to listen well, one that is not pursuing personal agendas, we can build a well-understood and valid K-12 curriculum, and we can be a superbly functioning district.

Similar to the other challengers, Speaker 3 offers a set of platitudes about good Board conduct. But in referring to the lack of trust between teachers and "this Board," characterizing the overall efforts of the district as "pathetic" and

asserting that current Board members are “pursuing personal agendas” she is less vague in conveying her negative assessment. Interestingly, of all the challenging candidates, she was most often accused in editorial letters in the paper of engaging in personal attack. That Speaker 3 was characterized this way, I suggest, is because she mixed the platitudes plus strategy with language commonly regarded as hostile.

In contrast to the Board conduct policy in which platitudes were self-contained proposals used to affirm Board members’ shared values and accomplish agreement, the challengers used platitudes to mark difference and criticize opponents’ actions. In everyday interaction, a common way people complain about circumstances or another person to unsympathetic listeners is to use idiomatic phrases (Drew & Holt, 1989). Complaints against another, for instance, are summarized by saying “It was like hitting your head against a brick wall,” or “I had to talk till I was blue in the face.” The interactional usefulness of idiomatic expression, Drew and Holt suggest, is that in removing a complaint from its supporting circumstantial details, the idiomatic expression becomes difficult to challenge. A related interactional purpose is served by platitudes, although accomplished in a more inferentially complex fashion.

Platitudes about conduct are statements with which no one would disagree. No one is likely to argue against “cooperation, listening, seeing the big picture,” “a climate of civility, better communication, building trust, listening well” or “modeling responsible leadership.” These are basic, taken-for-granted values of democratic institutions. Yet when these values are invoked in the context of a debate – an argumentation context typically described as hostile advocacy (Blair, 1995, Walton, 1992) – they frequently become instruments of person-directed attack. Platitudes are especially useful in a public argument context for they promote the sense that a speaker is addressing a policy concern rather than actually criticizing (attacking?) a person. That is, platitudinous proposals about desirable conduct avoid the impression that one is hostile or engaging in an ad hominem attack on one’s opponent. If one candidate’s claim concerns the inappropriateness of the other candidate’s conduct – a situation in which the speaker has an obvious stake – then the speaker needs to display that he or she is uninterested in personal attack (Potter, 1996). Platitudes are instruments of gentle criticism.

To be rhetorically effective, however, platitudes need to be embedded in a textual and environmental context where certain kinds of occurrences are salient. A first

part of the necessary context is the situation frame. The frame within which these platitudes were heard was an election debate. Frames, as several scholars have noted (Bateson, 1972, Tannen, 1993; Tracy, 1997), are kinds of social occasions that guide interpretation of talk. In a debate frame, audience members make sense of what candidates say with an assumption in place that they should hear what a candidate says as highlighting how he or she differs from the opponent. Within this frame, then, consider what meaning is likely to be inferred from Speaker 2's platitudinous statement.

I believe it is the Board's responsibility to model the behaviors we are expecting from the community… As a Board member I will model the behaviors which I expect from the community: leadership, cooperation, listening, seeing the big picture, educational excellence and problem solving,

Speaker 2's statement is formulated as a broad principle: stating what she believes is desirable Board behavior and what she is committed to doing. Yet given the frame, the statement implicitly functions as a criticism of her opponents' beliefs and actions. The statement is understood as asserting that her opponents do not favor acting in ways that model good behavior – leadership, cooperation, listening, etc. Left unspecified, however, is exactly how her opponents are not listening, not being cooperative, not modeling responsible behavior, and so on. Imagine if rather than what she said, Speaker 2 had said:

I believe Board members should not argue with each other; intellectual differences should not make people feel badly. Nor should a school board take an action that the vast majority of the teachers oppose, such as changing a course required for graduation. Furthermore, Board members should not "throw the finger" at members of the public."

A comment that was more specific, such as exemplified above, has all kinds of logical and identity problems that the platitudinous statement does not. Although not doing what the vast majority opposes is generally reasonable, it is easy to think of instances where this should not apply. In addition, most people would not want to equate listening and cooperating with doing what another party wants, even though it is reasonable to assume some link. Similarly, to mention a specific instance of irresponsible behavior such as "throwing a finger" seems to be getting personal in just the ways public figures are expected to avoid. The usefulness of a platitude is that when events have transpired in a community and are in its public consciousness, a platitude can evoke these events without incurring the interactional costs that would accrue from being specific.

Just as in therapy psychiatrists used the conversational device of the litote to navigate between competing moral and medical frames, thereby enabling them to refer to morally problematic actions delicately (e.g., Saying to a patient, " the report indicates you ran through the street not fully clothed" when the patient ran through the street naked) (Bergmann, 1992), so too do platitudes about conduct enable a candidate to navigate an ever present dilemma. Stated simply the dilemma is this: How does a candidate for public office legitimate that an other's (opposing candidate) communicative conduct deserve serious attention – how a person talks to and about others is important – without problematizing that the speaker, himself or herself, adheres to the norms of fair and respectful treatment that the other is being criticized as lacking.

In an editorial, the newspaper editor summarized the community's difficulties this way:
People in Rocky Mountain hold strong views on education, but many are tired of seeing the practical business of the public schools conducted in the spirit of a holy war. They're tired of the "Be civil, you moron" approach to public debate in which partisans on both sides, on and off the board, call for reason in one breath and issue personal attacks in the next. They suspect that issues such as school choice, at-risk students, and fiscal management can be addressed in a spirit of compromise and reconciliation. So do we. And we'll be looking for candidates – in both camps – who can bring that spirit to the Rocky Mountain School Board.**[xii]**

Conclusion
In the 1970's Zeigler et al. (1974) described school board elections in the United States as "uncontested" and "issueless." As this examination of Rocky Mountain's school board shows, this description no longer applies. In the 1990's all across the United States school boards are active sites for controversy. Whether the controversy is over the worth of vouchers, national tests, teacher training, bilingual education, or, as was the case here, how officials should conduct themselves as they work with others in their community, public arguments about education deserve a more careful look. US President James A. Garfield went so far as to argue that "Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained (Tuttle, 1958: 15). It is certainly the case that meetings involving decisions about local schools (people's own children as well as those of neighbors, family and friends) are one of the few places where large numbers of citizens participate in extended,

focused, critical discussion. Local school board talk deserves serious scholarly attention.

In this paper I focused on conduct arguments in one community's school board election debates. Of interest was the fact that conduct was not treated as an issue by both sets of candidates. The challengers, who were arguing that the incumbents were behaving inappropriately, foregrounded the issue whereas the incumbents largely ignored it. As Crosswhite (1996: 112) has noted, "there can be a conflict about what a conflict is about." Conflicts about how to frame "the real issue" seem especially probable when one party is proposing that it is the other party's conduct that is the issue. In the Rocky Mountain instance, the challenging candidates' position that conduct should be the focal election issue was persuasive. This outcome, I expect, is often not the case as conduct arguments are delicate endeavors with high potential for backfiring. To sum it up, a speaker's conversational style in making conduct arguments is inevitably treated as a lived display of the speaker's own code of conduct. In making claims about conduct the space between issues and persons becomes microscopic. When the issue is an other's conduct, a speaker's own conduct becomes an issue. In arguments about conduct, platitudes are useful: They enable speakers to render evaluation, to mean considerably than they say, and do so without appearing nasty and attacking.

NOTES

i. Non-incumbents in the three contested districts carried between 57.8% and 63.6% of the vote. The Daily Camera, (November 5, 1997).

ii. The Daily Camera, (November 5, 1997).

iii. In the early stages I did audiotaping. Roughly 20% of the tapes are in audiotape form only.

iv. Action-implicative discourse analysis is a method to aid developing grounded practical theories (Craig, 1989, Craig & Tracy, 1995). In addition to identifying problems and conversational practices, it also investigates participants' normative beliefs about the focal practice.

v. Names of the candidates and school district have been changed.

vi. The numbers "75-2" came from a public comment made to the Board by a high school Language Arts teacher (December 19, 1996). Whether there were exactly 77 language arts teachers who voted or whether the speaker is using the number "75" as an approximate round number to represent the relative degree of opposition is unclear.

vii. The Sunday Camera (September 7, 1997).
viii. Statement added to agenda in October, 1996.
ix. This statement was the main one that was discussed. Consensus decision-making is routinely distinguished from majority rule decision-making. Whether the group's confusion about these terms was ignorance about the term's meanings or a strategic move to define and associate majority rule decisions with the more positive and socially valued term (consensus) is not entirely clear. The 1995-97 Board was a highly educated group of people. No one had less that a college degree, two of the members had law degrees and two others had Ph.D.s. It was this item about consensus and majority rule that led one Board member in the minority faction to vote against the protocol. In voting negatively, though, she marked her agreement with the rest of the conduct statements.
x. The Daily Camera, (November 3, 1997).
xi. Speaker numbers indicate the position order in which the candidate gave opening commments.
xii. Sunday Camera, (September 7, 1997).

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