Deliberation in the Midst of Crisis

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Abstract
This essay considers the challenges of responding to the Sandusky child sex-abuse scandal while in the midst of said crisis. It discusses how the authors chose to respond as scholars and teachers of rhetoric concerned with deliberation.

Keywords
crisis, democratic deliberation, crisis communication, outreach, pedagogy

In late January 2012, as we were completing this article, the helicopters came back. The skies over campus had not seen this much traffic since early November, 2011, in the week following the release of a grand jury report resulting in the arrest of former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky on charges of sexually abusing young boys. That week also saw the arrests of two university officials on charges of perjury and failure to report child abuse as well as the firing of the University’s president and its football coach. The resulting unrest on campus called for heightened security, hence the helicopters. In January the helicopters were once again circling campus, this time because that football coach, beloved by so many, had died, his legacy besmirched by his self-admitted failure to “do more.” Also back were arguments about culpability, about football, about leadership, about memory, and yes, about victimage. They aren’t exactly the same arguments, of course, but the vitriol and moral high ground are back—if indeed they had a chance to go away—but they have shifted.

The helicopters and the vitriol and the edginess inspired by both are enough to help vivify our collective recollections of the days and weeks following the release of the grand jury report. At that time, the Penn State community was inundated with arguments and images about the charges and the failures of then-President Graham Spanier and football coach Joe Paterno to follow up on accusations. Caught in a 24-hour news cycle that brought national media to State College, glued to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and engaged in constant face-to-face conversations, many at Penn State felt exhausted and overwhelmed. With the traumatic news of Sandusky’s (alleged) crimes and sorrow for the victims came questions about how to move forward, how to interpret and understand the various discourses around us, and how to engage with each other about what this scandal means for Penn State’s collective identity.

We (the individual authors of this essay, not the “We” that echoed through campus halls and downtown alleyways with the somewhat disorienting chant “We Are . . . Penn State!”) were, like most of our colleagues and students on campus, by turns shocked, saddened, angered, disappointed, paradoxically buried by—and in—the exposure.

A Crisis of Deliberation
As faculty members and graduate students affiliated with Penn State’s Center for Democratic Deliberation (CDD), we were attuned to—and concerned by—the hyperbolic discourses bearing down around us: rhetorics of blame and praise from national media, articulations of confusion and pain throughout our community, rumors of insidious conspiracies, all of which stymied reflection and deliberation. A New York Times article profiled one Penn State professor who was holding discussions of the scandal in his course, but those discussions centered on the public relations content of the course such as the implications of scandal for marketing the Paterno brand (Schweber, 2011). Penn State’s Counseling and Psychological Services made itself available for individual counseling sessions, and however necessary and valuable, this resource facilitated private dialogue, not deliberation. We realized that we were witnessing not just an institutional crisis, but a crisis of public and semipublic deliberation as well. As scholars invested in the idea of a public institution as a site for democratic engagement and fostering public and proto-public deliberation (Eberly, 2000), we sought

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a way to intervene in this traumatic moment. We want to discuss here the deliberative choices we made in designing and enacting our intervention, not to uphold that intervention as some sort of perfect model, but as a way to start a conversation about what scholars in rhetoric and communication can do should a scandal like this (almost but not quite literally) light their campus on fire.

After weighing the prudence of holding a live discussion open to the community, we agreed to announce a “teach-in,” centered on a flexible pedagogical resource, as a fitting intervention. The resource leveraged pedagogical conventions like thematically organized discussion questions toward the deliberative goals of critical analysis and collective meaning-making. We worried that the dramatic and unfolding nature of the crisis might compromise the integrity of collective deliberation in a public forum. Instead, we imagined a resource that would work with deliberation in the small groups where it already lived. We targeted “established communities” ranging from classrooms, to student organizations, to community groups. Creating a new page on the CDD website, we named the resource “Deliberation in the Midst of Crisis”—a guide for anyone interested in deliberating about the scandal. We used e-mail and various social networking sites to encourage use of the guide, suggesting a designated set of “teach-in” days to garner a sense of collective response.

Most of “Deliberation in the Midst of Crisis” was developed in one frenetic afternoon as we five gathered, newsroom-style, around a table. We held ourselves to a tight deadline to allow for greatest circulation of the resource before the proposed teach-in dates. As we worked, we found that our central challenge was how to translate our academic expertise into a condensed, sound, and practical resource for a public audience deliberating in the midst of crisis.

Guiding Deliberation

The webpage’s introduction articulates the rationale and purpose of this type of intervention and invites use of the resource by a broad audience. The first resource included on the page is a set of suggested parameters for deliberation entitled “CDD Deliberation Guidelines.” Before we began work that afternoon, the CDD had no deliberation guidelines, and we are still not sure it does. Indeed, many others): how a community like Penn State functions (and might work differently) and how ideas and actions are represented in various media. Thus, many of the materials we provide, and questions we ask in the guide are about identity, place, and community. Resources include analytic arguments about the relationships among Penn State, college football, and sexual abuse. For example, many students were concerned about how news networks like ESPN represented them (focusing a whole evening of coverage on the “riots,” and giving much less coverage to a student-organized vigil for victims that included roughly 10,000 attendees), and many felt that they lacked the agency to speak back. Being quite aware of the rhetorical construction of the events downtown as a “riot,” we decided to include questions about those events, asking how they can best be defined, what motivates actors to either “riot” or be witness to such destructive behavior, and what alternative actions are available for students and community members. Lastly, given the ubiquity of rumors in those first few weeks, circulating via word of mouth, social networking sites, and even print, radio, and video journalism, we added a section on media literacy with general questions about sources, medium, credibility, and evidence that could be applied to any source.

As we debated what content—news stories, YouTube videos, and opinion pieces—we would add to the “Deliberating” webpage, we also discussed how to most effectively organize the wide range of topics, resources, and questions that we might include. We decided to organize the document thematically so that users could navigate the page quickly and easily based on interest. These themes include: identity, place, and culture; symbolic and material actions; leadership and stakeholders; media literacy; humor and satire; and argumentation and evidence.

Because so much of the public dialogue had been (and continues to be) about praise and blame (e.g., blaming Paterno and Spanier for inaction, blaming students for riots, blaming the national media for creating a spectacle, praising Paterno as a great man, blaming the Board of Trustees for hastily and unfairly firing Paterno), we wanted to draw attention to how citizens of a community talk with one another. One such example to promote this type of conversation was a YouTube video in which a young man makes a short, impassioned speech at a rally, asking that students hold their leadership accountable. The questions related to this clip were less about the man’s claims and more about audience reception and action. Students jeered, made ad hominem attacks on the dissenter, and chanted in support of Paterno. Other student voices in the video, however, called for a communal ethos of listening. We hoped that this example, and others, could prompt discussions about what it means to argue with civility and compassion.

In addition to concerns about listening to others’ arguments, we wished to address two other salient issues (among many others): how a community like Penn State functions (and might work differently) and how ideas and actions are represented in various media. Thus, many of the materials we provide, and questions we ask in the guide are about identity, place, and community. Resources include analytic arguments about the relationships among Penn State, college football, and sexual abuse. For example, many students were concerned about how news networks like ESPN represented them (focusing a whole evening of coverage on the “riots,” and giving much less coverage to a student-organized vigil for victims that included roughly 10,000 attendees), and many felt that they lacked the agency to speak back. Being quite aware of the rhetorical construction of the events downtown as a “riot,” we decided to include questions about those events, asking how they can best be defined, what motivates actors to either “riot” or be witness to such destructive behavior, and what alternative actions are available for students and community members. Lastly, given the ubiquity of rumors in those first few weeks, circulating via word of mouth, social networking sites, and even print, radio, and video journalism, we added a section on media literacy with general questions about sources, medium, credibility, and evidence that could be applied to any source.
The decisions to include these materials were made quickly and with consensus, and surely discussion questions could be more thorough, and resources for discussion could have been culled more meticulously. We continued to add materials over the next few days after our initial meeting, but we quickly found a group of sources whose inclusion was not quite as easy of a decision.

As the Penn State sex abuse scandal reached saturation in the national media, it took on a second mediated life as the object of topical humor. When popular sources of comedy such as The Daily Show and The Onion began commenting, and major newspapers across the country began carrying political cartoons depicting real and imagined scenes from State College, we realized that our resource needed a section on the rhetoricity of humor and satire. The decision to address the role of humor in crisis deliberations was easy enough, but more than any of the other sections of the webpage, humor forced us to discuss the ethics of what to include. One political cartoon was particularly difficult. Focusing on experiences of the victims, Mike Keefe of the Denver Post drew a cartoon depicting an alleged Sandusky victim, a little boy, holding his knees and crying in a locker-room shower. The caption read, “Will not be attending any Joe Paterno support rallies.” Although the cartoon contained no profanity, sex, violence, or gore, its emotionally charged content elicited verbal reactions from several of us upon seeing it for the first time. The cartoon made a salient political point and was reprinted by Penn State’s student newspaper, the Collegian. Nonetheless, the difficult nature of what it implied resulted in a conversation about whether to include it in our list of examples of humor and satire.

As our plan for a deliberative guide took shape, and now that we can reflect back on our decision to create it, we continue to struggle with the rhetorical, ethical, and kairotic implications of any type of intervention. Contemplating the institutional role of a teach-in required us to contemplate our own institutional positions. Providing a resource for deliberating over a sensitive and ongoing crisis can be hazardous business. Of the five us who helped to build the webpage, only one of us is tenured. We voiced concerns over the short- and long-term needs of students, colleagues, staff members, and the institution at large. Overall, our sense of urgency to take some action outweighed our doubts about doing so, but we hope this reflection can prompt additional conversation, especially from those who viewed “our” crisis from outside this insular community.

Offering up a resource for deliberating in the midst of crisis—and providing this resource with the hope, if not assurance, that it would be useful to others struggling as we were to make sense of the evolving situation—has helped us to recognize how a crisis situation carries with it the lessons and challenges of kairos, an ancient concept of time central to rhetorical studies that emphasizes timing, and opportunity. Attention to kairos demands a sensitivity to urgency and appropriateness in relation to a given rhetorical situation. We very much felt the need for some sort of timely response and decided to take swift action for this reason, despite our realization that as academics, we are ill-equipped to shift into pedagogical, much less scholarly, “crisis mode.” The rhythms of our profession demand the slow contemplation of ideas and the distance of multiple drafts and peer review. Our training cultivates a value for distance and objectivity, not the urgency of first response. (We are even suspicious of our own inadequate distance from our intervention now, as we write a critical reflection for this special issue.) And despite our trust in the promise of deliberation to move individuals toward greater understanding, if not concord, in times of dis-ease, we recognize that effective deliberation takes time. One cannot rush a commitment to listen and hear and think and respond. We recognize these constraints, and see them as resources that might move our pedagogical discussions in a fruitful direction. Considering that corporations invest in robust crisis communication plans, can we not recognize a similar value in pedagogical crisis plans? If deliberative values such as recursivity and reflection shape such plans, might using them potentially break one-directional news-feed cycles that frame our understanding of a crisis-in-motion?

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Authors’ Note
The authors of this piece chose to list their names alphabetically to reflect the spirit of collaboration in which “Deliberation in the Midst of Crisis,” both the webpage and this piece, were composed.

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Notes

1. The webpage is available at http://cdd.la.psu.edu/education/deliberation-in-the-midst-of-crisis
2. The video is available at http://youtu.be/35NZfcts4tA

References


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