

'It's just a process': questioning in the construction of a university crisis



Discourse Studies
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 SAGE Publications
 (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi,
 Singapore and Washington DC)
 www.sagepublications.com
 Vol 11(2): 179–197
 10.1177/1461445608100943

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ABSTRACT Questioning in an organizational context is a challenging event in multiple senses. Questioning may be used to criticize the leaders of an organization. For the criticisms to be heard as legitimate, however, the questioner must operate within contextual constraints (Shotter, 1993). The main purpose of this article is to examine how questioning functions to construct a university's crisis. Discourse within two faculty senate meetings is analyzed. Three faculty questioning strategies are described: appealing to another organizational entity, requesting either/or information; and metacommunicative commentary. Administration and senate leadership responded to questions using the strategies of appealing to a process and metacommunicative commentary. Faculty questioning functioned to challenge a current course of action while operating from within the organizational guidelines of discourse. Alternatively, leadership responses deferred any substantive change in the course of action. The strategies are related to issues of power, social action, and models of educational governance.

KEY WORDS: *educational governance, meetings, problem construction, questioning*

In 1995–6, Public University,¹ a public, research-oriented university in the United States, faced a major budget crisis from an anticipated \$12 million shortfall of state funding.² To cope with this crisis, university administrators made two significant decisions. First, the largest college within the university, the college of arts and science, decided to review for elimination six departments and programs. Second, the administration decided to create a \$6.4 million reserve fund to enable the university to continue to develop in anticipation of future reduced state funding. Some faculty members were concerned about the combined impact of creating a reserve fund while trying to eliminate programs and reasoned that in essence, programs and academic departments would be

cut to create the fund. Faculty members raised their concerns within the faculty senate by questioning senate leadership and administrators regarding their actions. In turn, senate leadership and members of the administration provided responses to account for their actions.

The main purpose of this project is to examine how questioning functions to construct situations as problematic within an educational governance context. By framing a circumstance as problematic, questioning not only defines and characterizes a situation, but also implicates a morale stance. In this respect, questioning is intertwined with power and the negotiation of social reality in that questioning may challenge certain notions of social reality and thus, challenge power relations and actions interconnected with those constructions. In constructing a crisis, questioning has direct implications regarding shaping future actions.

For this study, I focus on two faculty senate meetings related to a university's budget crisis and its response of reviewing for elimination academic departments and programs. The public context of faculty senate meetings provided an ideal situation for examining how questioning functioned to construct a crisis as it developed.

Educational governance

Educational organizations are a type of organization that because of their institutional character and history differ from business corporate types of organizations. As explained by Meyer and Rowan (1977), institutions are organizational bodies that embody core values of a society. As such, they also operate with a great deal of ambiguity and '[require] people to assume that everyone is acting in good faith' (p. 358). In addition, 'decoupling and maintenance of face, in other words, are mechanisms that maintain the assumption that people are acting in good faith' (p. 358) (also see Weick, 1976). Baldrige (1983) identified the following characteristics as distinguishing colleges and universities from businesses and other types of organizations: goal ambiguity, client-serving, problematic technologies, high professionalism, 'fragmented' professional staffs and environmental vulnerability. While university organizations share many features in common with other types of organizations, there are important differences that distinguish them from other types of organizations.

Scholars have identified the following models for how university organizations operate: bureaucratic, collegial, political, cultural, and anarchical (Baldrige, 1983; Cohen et al., 1972; Masland, 1985). To summarize these models briefly, the bureaucratic model emphasizes uniform, codified rules; the collegial model focuses on relationships; the political model examines universities as a set of power relations; the cultural model treats universities as a culture or conglomeration of cultures; and the anarchical model highlights ambiguity. Baldrige (1983) argues that these models do not operate independently within a university organization but may exist simultaneously within a given university. Baxter's (1993) study particularly illustrated this point. Using culture as the dominant framework,

her project identified how the codes of 'collegiality' and 'bureaucracy' clashed during a university's re-examination of its governance policies. These clashing codes manifested in differing assumptions regarding communication, with faculty subscribing to a code of collegiality that emphasized oral communication and administration subscribing to a code of bureaucracy that emphasized written communication and the systematic application of rules.

Within universities, faculty senates are a prominent aspect of shared governance. Approximately 87 percent of colleges and universities within the United States have faculty senates or the equivalent organizational body (Tierney and Minor, 2003). According to Tierney (1983), the five functions of a senate are: directional, news-related, ceremonial, decisional, and conformational. There is a great deal of controversy regarding the effectiveness of faculty senates as decision-making entities (Birnbaum, 1989; Tierney and Minor, 2003). Regardless of the efficacy of senates, they do exist as important symbolic entities of shared governance within a university (Birnbaum, 1989). As with other educational governance structures, faculty senates are loosely coupled systems that operate with a great deal of ambiguity (Castor, 2005; Kreps, 1980; Weick, 1976). Tierney (1983) argued that within faculty senates, governance occurs by 'conversation' in that even though written material is important in senate operations, (oral) speech acts and speech events take primacy in interpreting that material and in the other functions of the senate. As Castor (2005) and Castor and Cooren (2006) illustrated, when resolutions are put forward in a senate, much of the discussion may be taken up with defining the key terms of the resolution or situations referred to within the resolution. This project specifically focuses on the role of questioning as an interpretive resource in educational governance.

Questioning

As already noted, educational governance constitutes a unique type of organizational structure. There are aspects of questioning in this context that have features in common with questioning in organizational and political contexts.

While there has been a great deal of research on organizational discourse (Putnam and Fairhurst, 2001), a focus specifically on questioning has been much more limited. The two areas where questioning in organizational contexts has been explored extensively are employment interviews and whistle blowing. Employment interviews constitute situations in which there are distinct power relations. The interviewer may pose the questions and is involved in choosing which interviewee to give a job to. The interviewee is obligated to answer the questions in socially and professionally desirable ways. The person who is awarded the job may not necessarily be the one with the best qualifications per se, but the one who is more linguistically adept at answering questions (Parton et al., 2002), able to present the more desirable social identity (Campbell and Roberts, 2007), or shows trustworthiness (Kerekes, 2006). Questions in organizational contexts do not end with the job interview.

As Jablin and associates (Jablin, 2001; Jablin and McComb, 1984) have identified, questions on the part of newcomers are a vital part of organizational assimilation and socialization. However, these types of questions address how to become a part of the organization rather than how to question problematic organizational practices *per se*.

In the case of whistle blowing, the very act of whistle blowing constitutes a form of questioning of organizational actions that are specifically deemed as unethical (Miceli, 2004). They may begin by calling attention to the issue within the organization. However, the internal organizational response may include actions to stifle the whistleblower through demotion or threats. The whistleblower may eventually call attention to the organizational wrongdoing by going outside of the organization. The degree to which a whistleblower may experience organizational retaliation is unclear (Near and Miceli, 1996); however, the act of whistle blowing is a very emotionally intense and trying experience for the whistleblower him- or herself (Henik, 2008).

The areas of interviewing and whistle blowing in organizational contexts demonstrate the sensitivities involved with respect to power issues and questioning in organizations. In the case of interviewing, questioning is an organizationally sanctioned practice in which the interviewer has power and is in control of the questioning. In the case of whistleblowing, questioning begins with someone who is in a limited position of power. If the questioning is undesirable, that person may face retaliation or possibly be ostracized from the organization.

Questioning in political contexts may take on a more adversarial nature and has overlap with questioning in news interviews, as one arena where politicians face questioning (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). In considering questioning as a process that includes responses, responses have a delicate nature in that it may not be desirable for a politician to answer a question directly but alternatively, evading answering a question also has undesirable consequences (Bull and Mayer, 1993).

Questioning in political contexts may also serve the function of highlighting a problematic position or policy. Take for example, the questioning that Bill Clinton faced when his different affairs came to public light at different points in time (Clayman, 2002). In political contexts, questioning serves more than an information-seeking function. Questioning and responding both serve strategic ends to undermine another or bolster one's own position.

As the aforementioned studies evidence, questions and power are interconnected. Questions may be used to equalize power, as in dialogic questions, or to maintain power over another. Wang (2006) particularly showed how questions control and constrain through turn allocation and topic control. She assumed that questions are the purview of those who already hold positions of institutional power. Other researchers, however, have identified ways that questions may be used to challenge others, including those in positions of power as in the case of whistle-blowing.

Ehrlich and Sidnell (2006) analyzed presuppositions as one way in which questioners may attempt to control responses. Presuppositions presume the

truth of prior information. Ehrlich and Sidnell provided the example statement of 'John realizes that Mary is seriously ill' (p. 659) which presupposes the notion that Mary is seriously ill. Some presuppositions may be hostile in their implications such as 'have you stopped beating your wife?' in that a 'yes' response indicates that one did engage in this behavior in the past and a 'no' response indicates that one is still engaging in this harmful behavior. Thus, when someone is posed with a question that contains a presupposition, they are faced with a dilemma. As Dillon (1990) explained:

If he [*sic*] challenges the question he will be heard to evade the question, by force of not giving a direct answer, yes/no; and he may well lose credibility or 'face.' If he answers it yes/no he is accepting the disputable or even hostile presupposition, and thus loses credibility and face (Harris, 1989). (p. 100)

Questioning in organizational and political contexts illustrates how questioning may be used to challenge others or frame an event as problematic. In an organization, there are multiple goals that have to be attended to in identifying and framing problems. To be successful and deemed credible, a questioner must problematize the status quo in ways that are acceptable within the organization if s/he wishes to be viewed as a legitimate member of the group (Shotter, 1993). However, in order to accomplish change, the questioner must frame her questions in ways to be persuasive. How this dynamic is accomplished is the main aspect of questioning illustrated in the following case study.

Questioning and constructing a university crisis

BACKGROUND

In the middle of the fall 1994 term, the President of Western University announced the decision to review for elimination several departments and programs as a response to the budget crisis. This decision was extremely controversial, especially for members of the targeted departments and programs who felt that the reasons provided for their proposed elimination were vague and that the review process was procedurally problematic. In addition, as noted previously, while the university was undergoing a budget cut and reviewing programs for elimination, the administration decided to create a reserve fund to enable the university to continue to innovate despite budget difficulties.

After the announcement of the proposed program eliminations, faculty senate meetings became a site for protests. The day after the announcements, students and faculty from the programs designated for review attended the senate meeting and delivered speeches of protest. Another way that the senate became a site for protest, and the way that will be the focus of this study, is through a resolution proposed and discussed by faculty senators. In December, a faculty member presented the following resolution that was approved by a 54 to 11 vote:

Whereas budget reductions in addition to the state-mandated cuts for the 1995–97 biennium in order to form any additional fund would necessarily result in additional painful and destructive retrenching, the Faculty Senate adopts the following policy: No such fund shall be created during the period of these mandated cuts unless the

Administration presents substantial justification to the Senate for the necessary reallocation of funds and the Senate agrees thereto.

This resolution was intended to prevent the creation of additional funds without substantial justification from the administration since, according to the resolution sponsor, the setting aside of funds would function to contribute to the shortfall in regularly funded areas such as the academic departments being reviewed for elimination. After passage of this resolution, the university administration along with members of the senate leadership continued to discuss the establishment of an additional fund as the program review process was underway. Consequently, during the next two senate meetings in January and March, faculty members, and the resolution sponsor in particular, asked administrators and the senate leadership to account for their actions regarding the reserve fund. The questioning was due to the sentiment that the leadership was contradicting the resolution.

The data for this project are drawn from a one and a half-year case study of decision-making in faculty senate meetings. For this specific study, data consisted of field notes of speaker comments regarding the budget crisis and program eliminations during the January and March faculty senate meetings. The researcher took detailed notes of senate comments, and immediately after the meetings, typed up the notes to further flesh out the details of what was said. Other documentation such as meeting agendas and minutes were collected to double-check the content of the field notes and to provide additional background information on the discussions.

In the first meeting in January, the primary questioner was Senator Smith³ who was the sponsor of the December resolution. There were a total of 34 utterances or turns of talk related to the discussion of the budget, reserve fund, and program elimination process. In terms of meeting sequencing, the meeting was called to order by the chair of the faculty senate. Towards the beginning of the meeting, the President of the university gave a report in which he explicitly addressed the university's budget situation and the resolution that was passed by the senate in December. After the President spoke, the Vice Chair of the senate, who also served as the chair of the senate committee on planning and budgeting, also gave a report on the budget situation and addressed comments specifically on the December resolution. After the Vice Chair's report, a long sequence of interactions began between Senator Smith and the Vice Chair that consisted of Smith's questions and evaluations and the Vice Chair's responses. For this discussion, Senator Smith dominated the discussion, posing in total 12 comments, questions, or evaluative remarks.

Smith's line of questioning was prompted in great part by the senate Vice Chair's summary of a report given by the Provost. He said:

Excerpt #1 (Lines 108–28)

- 108 There were three points.
 109 In summary, the first was that the additional fund should
 110 be continued to be created. That is that the cuts necessary
 111 to establish that fund should be continued to be pursued and

112 not terminated at that point. So the fund, the
 113 Administration suggests should exist. Secondly, the
 114 Provost suggested that the Senate committee on Planning
 115 and Budgeting should start with a clean slate in deciding
 116 how the fund should be allocated. All of the previous
 117 announced allocations which you will recall were
 118 speculative in an appendix to my report of the last meeting were
 119 withdrawn, but those uses and others were on the
 120 table, so the question was given a long list of needs and a
 121 short list of money, which if any, should be allocated
 122 according to that fund, and then if the resolution is
 123 followed, brought back here for your advice. The third
 124 point that the Provost made that the administration had
 125 determined at allocating \$16 million in temporary funds as
 126 appropriate to the funding of the various needs that were in
 127 front of the University and in front of the Senate Committee
 128 on Planning and Budgeting.

The administration's actions after the passage of the December resolution was to first, continue to establish a reserve fund, second, to enlist the senate committee on planning and budgeting to determine how to distribute the reserve fund, and third, to enlist this same senate committee in determining how to distribute a second, temporary fund.

In the next senate meeting in March, the university President and senate Vice Chair gave reports that also provided accounts of their actions during the budget crisis. In so doing they addressed the December resolution and the line of questioning from the January meeting about administration and senate leadership actions. Afterwards, Senator Smith again initiated a line of questioning that called for additional accounts. In terms of turn sequencing, after the Chair called the meeting to order, the President again gave his report, addressing primarily the university budget situation. The Vice Chair offered his report in which he also addresses the December resolution on the handling of the budget crisis; this was followed by comments by the Acting Provost on the budget resolution. Senator Smith then indicated his direct, negative evaluation of actions of the senate leadership and university administration on the current process ('we're witnessing a sham right now'). This was followed by an attempted response to Smith's accusation by the Vice Chair. In contrast to the previous meeting, other senators besides Smith, posed questions related to the budget situation.

QUESTIONING

There were various ways in which speakers questioned the actions of the administration and senate leadership. The three questioning strategies identified through this project were: 1) Appeal to another organizational entity; 2) Requesting either/or information; and 3) Metacommunicative commentary.

Appeal to another organizational entity

One strategy that was used to question leadership actions was to emphasize how the weight of another institutional authority was behind a question or

alternative course of action. Specifically, given the passage of the resolution in December, Senator Smith, the author of the resolution, frequently referred to the resolution in his questioning of senate leadership actions. During the January meeting, Smith referred to the December resolution in questioning the Senate Vice Chair on his follow-up actions in light of the acting Provost's report:

Excerpt #2 (Lines 179–91)

179 The motion which we passed at our last
 180 meeting said that no such fund shall be created unless the
 181 administration comes back to us to justify it. If I
 182 understood you correctly Jack [the VC], you said the acting Provost
 183 gave you three points. The first of which was such fund
 184 will be created. And I want to know whether this leadership
 185 has opposed that and what you've done to carry out the
 186 resolution that was passed. Because the discussion on this
 187 floor at the last meeting was exactly the point that to create
 188 such a fund, an additional number of programs would have
 189 to be cut than those which might have to be cut under the
 190 quote mandate portion. This body said that it refused to go
 191 along with that and wanted its officers to act that way . . .

In posing his question to the senate vice-chair, Smith used the resolution as part of his justification. The resolution, however, is meaningful as a proxy for the views of the senate. In Castor and Cooren's (2006)⁴ analysis of faculty senate decision-making, they noted that the process of problem formulation for the faculty senate involved a process of 'selecting an agent within a chain of agencies' (p. 593). This chain of agencies could consist of individuals, groups, or even, nonhumans such as texts or situations (Cooren, 2004). What is crucial in the selection of agencies is that an agent, whether human or nonhuman, can compel another to do something. In Senator Smith's questioning, he creates a chain of agencies that connects the wishes of the senate body to the resolution. In turn, his question functions as an attempt to compel the senate leadership toward a particular action vis-a-vis the resolution as a proxy for the views of the senate ('This body said that it refused to go along with that and wanted its officers to act that way').

At the March meeting, Senator Smith again referred to the resolution as another organizational authority in questioning administrative and senate leadership actions:

Excerpt #3 (Lines 268–78)

268 Well, I feel that I'd like to make a couple of comments as
 269 the author of the December 1st resolution that passed *by a*
 270 *margin of 5 to 1*. The debate made it quite clear, and in my
 271 intention I thought I made it quite clear at the time, was that
 272 until the administration presented substantial justification to
 273 the senate, and the senate agreed, there should be no review
 274 of one third of the programs for the creation of the
 275 additional six million dollars. What I'm hearing is despite

276 that debate, and despite the intention of the resolution, and
 277 despite the vote of the senate, that the resolution is being
 278 interpreted as if it were a *theoretical exercise*.

In his remarks, Smith highlighted the prior senate debate, the resolution, and the vote of the senate ('by a margin of 5 to 1') as other institutional agents that support his contention that the administration was supposed to provide justification rather than treat the resolution as a 'theoretical exercise'. The December resolution functioned as a key element in the use of an authority to compel the senate leadership to act in a particular way in their interactions with the administration. Behind the resolution stands the senate that approved the resolution. In addition, as the author of the resolution, Smith claimed particular insight regarding the interpretation of what the resolution meant.

The reliance upon a written document, the December resolution, is similar to Baxter's (1993) description of a code of bureaucracy in which written documents are used as a way to codify procedures for the protection and fair treatment of university members. However, as Tierney (1983) pointed out, even when there is an emphasis on written codification, how written documents come into play is contingent upon the 'conversations' or oral communication among organizational members. This negotiation of interpretations is seen in the other questioning strategies that challenged administration and senate leadership while also defining the crisis situation.

Either/or questions

At a very basic level, some questioning activities were phrased as requests for more information. 'Requests for information' sound like a neutral activity, but these requests were not neutral. Speakers posed either/or options with one of the paths being framed as more desirable than the other. Speakers' requests for information contained presuppositions in which if the responder agreed to one part, s/he would be condemning his/her current actions and if the responder assented to another part, s/he would have to agree with the course of action favored by the questioner.

For example, during the January meeting, Senator Smith initiated a long series of questioning moves by requesting information:

Excerpt #4 (Lines 192–6)

192 I'd like to know rather than *sitting down and talking with*
 193 *the Provost about how to implement the creation of the*
 194 *fund* and then bring that back to us, what you have done to
 195 *oppose the creation of such a fund* which was what we
 196 passed five to one last meeting.

In the first alternative that Smith posed (of 'sitting down and talking with the Provost'), Smith used phrasing (i.e. 'about how to implement the creation of the fund') that implied that if the Vice Chair stated that this first option was the only action he was taking, then he would have been in violation of the resolution. In addition, this phrasing aligns the two actions of talking with the Provost and

aiding in the fund creation. The alternative to violating the resolution was to 'oppose the creation of such a fund'. The actual resolution did not specify that the senate leadership should do this, but that 'substantial justification' should be provided for the fund. However, because Smith described opposition to the fund creation as part of the resolution, he presented the second alternative as constituting following the resolution by opposing the fund creation rather than having open-ended meetings to talk with the Provost about how to create the fund. Smith's request for information or wanting to know what the senate leadership was doing was not neutral. It contained challenging (hostile?) presuppositions about possible actions and that one set of them would violate the December resolution.

Another Senator in the March meeting also posed a question in the form of a request for information:

Excerpt #5 (Lines 362–70)

362 O.K., this is a short question. I guess I'm still not clear,
 363 regardless of the legislature, if we get close to the minimum
 364 which President Gerberding named as 661, would this
 365 reserve fund still be created? Because we're not cut
 366 because of the minimum budget from the legislature, *we're*
 367 *cut because of the six point four million that has been created from*
 368 *the reserve fund.* And my understanding was that this
 369 reserve fund is not going to be created until the
 370 administration presents some official justification.

While the speaker initially started with a question, he framed his question such that a direct response such as a yes to the initial question would imply the dire and undesirable consequences that he later cited ('we're cut because of the six point four million that has been created from the reserve fund.'). His series of statements constituted a questioning of the administration. According to the speaker, the consequences of eliminating departments and programs would come about if the administration took actions that were inconsistent, based on an earlier framing, with the senate passed resolution.

In the March meeting, Senator Montgomery's 'request for information' was also a question that contained a presupposition about the various relationships between program eliminations and creating the reserve fund. She began her question by describing different possible scenarios of the current program review process and budget planning process:

Excerpt #6 (Lines 324–31)

324 if we do get this [needed funds], anywhere near the
 325 seven twenty three, and we find out that we don't need to
 326 make those cuts, can we get a guarantee that you will, or at
 327 least a suggestion that that money will then go to not
 328 making the eliminations of the departments. Instead of
 329 saying, well, gosh, we have all this money now, isn't this a
 330 wonderful thing, but we're still going to get rid of those
 331 departments.

Montgomery's comments, while eventually posed as an open-ended question ('So I'd like to get your ideas about whether that's a possibility'), are clear in outlining the options and what they mean (i.e. get the money and make the cuts, get the money and do not make the cuts, or get the money and cut the departments anyway).

Ehrlich and Sidnell (2006) analyzed presuppositions in lawyer questions. One of the ways that presuppositions operate to attempt to control responses is by embedding within them a proposition which, by the phrasing of the question itself, cannot be denied. In posing a question with a presupposition, this questioning strategy becomes a vehicle for criticizing particular organizational actions. In the case of requesting either/or information, one option is presented as desirable and the other as undesirable. The person to whom the question is posed then is left with the option of either admitting to an untoward action, admitting to a desirable course of action that happens to be the course of action preferred by the questioner, resisting answering the question, or challenging the question.

Metacommunicative commentary

Another line of questioning that functioned to challenge leadership actions as well as responses consisted of metacommunicative commentary. Metacommunication is most simply, communication about communication (Craig, 2005; Katriel and Philipsen, 1981; Philipsen, 1997). As such, metacommunication functions reflexively to comment upon and evaluate prior communication.

One way that metacommunication was used was in reference to the December resolution and evaluating the communication of the administration and senate leadership in addressing the resolution. As Senator Smith directly stated during the January meeting:

Excerpt #7 (Lines 217–18)

217 There is an inconsistency if we take as Senate policy (?)
218 When *you haven't told* what this body has done.

Smith's problematizing occurs in two moves. First, he labeled the Senate leadership actions as inconsistent, and second, he categorized the preceding responses of the senate vice chair as 'not telling' what has been done. Key to the 'not telling' criticism is that Smith discounted the prior two responses of the Vice Chair to his initial question about wanting to know what the senate leadership has done. Basically, Smith treats the prior responses as non-responsive.

During the March meeting, Senator Smith again points out an inconsistency between senate leadership actions and the resolution:

Excerpt #8 (Lines 270–8)

270 The debate made it quite clear, and in my
271 intention I thought I made it quite clear at the time, was that
272 until the administration presented substantial justification to
273 the senate, and the senate agreed, there should be no review
274 of one third of the programs for the creation of the
275 additional six million dollars. What I'm hearing is despite

276 that debate, and despite the intention of the resolution, and
 277 despite the vote of the senate, that the resolution is being
 278 interpreted as if it were a theoretical exercise.

The above statement challenged the interpretation put forth by the administration and senate leadership earlier. The interpretation was that discussing the creating of new funds is a 'process' and not the actual act of creating new funds (this response strategy will be discussed later). The speaker indicated that by discussing new funds, the administration was not adhering to the senate policy that resulted from a debate, resolution, and vote of the university's faculty governance body.

In his analysis of contested evidence in a courtroom context, Drew (1992) explained how descriptions on the part of lawyer and witness can function to challenge a witness testimony or a lawyer's claim. In the case of the senate discussion, differing descriptions functioned as an indirect form of criticism. In some cases, the words uttered may not seem to challenge or disagree with a previous statement. The words, however, are uttered in such a way, by intonation or phrasing, to indicate the speaker's evaluation of prior comments. For example, from the March meeting, immediately after the senate Vice Chair made some comments about the reserve fund, another senator stated:

Excerpt #9 (Lines 447–8)

447 Can you alter your remarks to say that the *non-created* fund
 448 is being held in escrow?

The above comment used the phrasing of the Vice Chair (i.e. 'non-creat[ion]') and did not state a disagreement to the characterization of the fund not yet being created. However, the speaker combined two aspects of the fund that administrators and the senate leadership previously discussed in such a way as to imply a conceptual contradiction. The speaker implied that on the one hand, the administration had claimed that the fund is not yet created, and on the other hand, the administration had stated that the funds were to be held in escrow. The interpretation presented by the speaker is the contradiction of holding a non-existing fund in escrow.

In another example, Senator Montgomery posed a question to the university president, who stated that he felt he already answered the question 'implicitly and as explicitly as I'm willing to do at this point . . .' Montgomery then responded, 'it was VERY, VERY implicit then'. At a basic level, Montgomery voices agreement with the president; however, Montgomery's uptake and emphasis on the use of the president's term 'implicit' highlighted how his response was overly implicit. That Montgomery's comment was treated as a questioning comment is evident in the president's response immediately afterwards ('That the best I could do . . .').

Metacommunicative commentary is a specific type of descriptive communication. As seen through the analysis of courtroom testimony (Drew, 1992), contesting descriptions or presenting alternative descriptions constitute one way to question or challenge the remarks of another. Given the significance of

debate and talk in governance meetings (Tierney, 1983), metacommunication played a significant role in questioning. In particular, metacommunication was used to describe prior comments as nonresponsive, inconsistent or contradictory. In doing so, the actions of senate leadership and administrators were characterized as insufficient for the given situation.

RESPONSES

Administrator and senate leadership responses consisted of the following strategies: 1) being in a process/contingency planning; and 2) metacommunicative commentary.

Being in a process

Some administrative and senate leadership responses to faculty questioning involved highlighting how events were 'in process' and that planning for 'contingencies' was occurring. By highlighting these, leadership responses in essence deferred action given that, because events were in process rather than actually happening, there was not actually anything to take action on at the moment.

One example is in response to a challenge that critiqued the creating of new funds while programs were being reviewed for elimination. The senate Vice Chair's response was:

Excerpt #10 (Lines 221–3)

221 Just assume that there is no fund created
222 until there are budget cuts. There are at this moment, no
223 budget cuts. There is a process.

The word 'process' refers to the focus of the faculty member's critique. As a way of defusing the criticism regarding creating new funds, administration and senate leadership in conveying administrative actions redefined 'creating new funds' into a process as distinct from a product. In that way senate leadership showed that the action for which they were being criticized was not actually what they were doing. By eliminating the focus of criticism, the senate leadership showed that it was not being inconsistent. In turn, the senate leadership also denied the framing or interpretation asserted by the faculty member.

In appealing to the unknown aspect of a situation in process, the leadership defused the situation by showing that circumstances were beyond and outside of their control. For example, at one point the president of the university stated:

Excerpt #11 (Lines 342–50)

342 That's the best I could do. We don't know where our
343 budget will be, and we don't have a pre-existing automatic
344 plan for if our budget is such and such, if this happens, or if
345 our budget is such and such, that happens . . .
346 you're asking me to provide guarantees on the basis of
347 hypothetical situations for a budget outcome that [is still unknown].

Because the budget was unknown, as the President stated, he was unable to answer the challenge addressed to him because there was, at the time, no answer.

One function of redefining the situation as being in process is to claim implicitly that one does not have control or agency over the situation and therefore cannot be held accountable.

Metacommunicative commentary

Just as faculty members used metacommunicative commentary to present an alternative description, administration and senate leadership also used metacommunicative commentary to re-characterize prior communication. As noted earlier, the resolution was used as one resource for criticizing; discussing how to interpret the resolution became one way to deal with faculty questioning. As the Vice Chair stated:

Excerpt #12 (Lines 224–9)

224 That is to say that one interpretation of the
225 resolution would be that funds shouldn't be created nor any
226 process toward the creation of it. And I'm sorry, yes, I'm
227 sorry that I did not read it that way and if that is the will of
228 the Faculty Senate of course, that will be the policy of the
229 Senate leadership.

After this comment, the vice-chair requested help from the senate chair on how to resolve the disagreement with Senator Smith. The chair's response was basically, 'All of this is still speculative, but the budget process goes on all the time so we need to deal with some of these things right now' (lines 245–8), thus leaving out a change in the current course of action. Shortly afterwards the senate chair also added that 'it depends to some extent on what you mean by the word create' (lines 257–8). By throwing open to interpretation the word 'create', the senate chair leaves open how to interpret the resolution as well as the administration and senate leadership's actions during the current crisis.

During the March meeting, the university president used metacommunicative commentary to deflect a question:

Excerpt #13 (Lines 338–40)

338 If that question's addressed to me, I addressed it *implicitly*
339 and as explicitly as I'm willing to do at this point in the
340 proceedings in my opening remarks.

The president, in essence, claimed to have answered the question already by labeling some of his earlier comments as 'implicitly' addressing the question. As a note though, this tactic was not effective in that the questioner agreed that yes, the prior response was 'VERY, VERY implicit'.

Discussion

Faculty questioning involved appealing to the legitimacy of another organizational entity, requesting information through either/or questions, and metacommunicative commentary. Referring to another organizational source

of legitimation provided a way for faculty to challenge university and senate leadership in a way that operated within the guidelines of university conduct. Thus, even though faculty questioned those in higher positions of power, they did so not necessarily as individuals, given their references to the support of other legitimate organizational agents such as a resolution and faculty vote. In this respect, faculty were able to balance the multiple goals of questioning university leadership while maintaining their status as legitimate members of the university community (Shotter, 1993).

In posing questions as requests for information, faculty used 'either/or' forms of questions with presuppositions embedded within them. In this form of questioning, faculty were able to specify which course of action was desirable and which was not. In doing so, their questioning implicated both a particular moral stance (i.e. not violating a senate resolution) as well as a specific, desirable future course of action (i.e. justifying use of temporary funds before planning what to do with those funds).

Metacommunicative commentary provided a way to use a specific type of description about prior communication to frame and thus criticize administrative and senate leadership actions. Specifically, faculty were able to characterize responses as nonresponsive or to disagree with the characterizations of the leadership regarding their actions.

In their study of a University of California Regents' meeting to discuss affirmative action, West and Fenstermaker (2002) discussed the role of accountability in person descriptions. West and Fenstermaker noted that 'accountability is a feature of social relationships, and its idiom comes from the institutional arena in which those relationships are brought to life' (p. 541). Within the educational governance context, resolutions, debates, policies, etc. constitute part of the material of accountability; and, as shown through this project as well as Baxter (1993), Tierney (1983) and West and Fenstermaker's (2002) work, the meaning of institutional documents and their ability to hold others accountable are interactional accomplishments.

In contrast, administrative responses focused on defining current circumstances as 'in process' and on using metacommunicative commentary also. In essence, the administration and senate leadership did not interpret its actions as being inconsistent with the resolution because of the uncertainty of the current situation (the budget), and the administration viewed its actions as reasonable, given the indefinite circumstances. By appealing to a process, the uncertainty of the situation was conveyed and used as a means of justification for actions. In addition, the aforementioned responses functioned to transfer power from the person responding. By transferring power, the responder also basically transferred responsibility for the situation.

Leadership's use of metacommunicative commentary functioned to present an alternative description of communication to that presented by faculty. In the leadership's use of metacommunication, what was previously characterized as nonresponsive became responsive. Leaders' use of different ways of describing – as a situation in process or by metacommunicative re-framing – bears striking similarity to how school district leaders handled face-sensitivities during the

unfolding of a crisis (Tracy, 2007). As she noted, 'leaders' acts of accounting were accomplished through speech acts designed to describe and inform' (p. 427). Generally then, describing and informing do not function neutrally, but instead are strategic framing devices to construct or diffuse a problematic situation.

The use of the different questioning and responding strategies can be related to the different models of educational governance described earlier. Unlike in Baxter's (1993) study, faculty, rather than administrators, relied on a written code to guide actions. In the case of this project, the written code was the resolution developed by a faculty member and approved by a representative faculty body. Thus, in this case, faculty seemed to subscribe to a code of 'bureaucracy' as a way of protecting their peers during the unique situation of the budget shortfall.

By appealing to a situation 'in process', administrators and senate leadership communication relate best to the anarchical model of educational governance. The anarchical model highlights the uncertainty and ambiguity of university actions and decisions. In appealing to this ambiguity, actions can be taken that are not definitive given that everything is in flux.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this project was to examine how questioning constructs situations as problematic in an educational governance context. Within this context, those attempting to define a situation as problematic must operate from within the constraints of the organizational setting given the need to maintain their own credibility and given future, anticipated ongoing interactions within the organization. Questioners, to maintain this balance, drew on organizational norms as a means to accomplish their questioning.

The strategies for challenging and responding identified in this project are not meant to be exhaustive. Indeed, an avenue for future study is to continue to explore the use of questioning in organizational and/or political contexts, particularly when those who do the questioning are successful without experiencing retaliation. Such a project is useful in identifying ways to challenge a course of action that works within rather than, outside of the organizational context. Another, related limitation of this project is the narrow focus on a single-case. Obviously, similar situations in different governance contexts can be studied for additional insight on how questioning functions to challenge those in positions of power.

CODA

In the end, the university received a greater amount of money from the state legislature than anticipated at the start of the program review and elimination process. Some targeted programs were still eliminated and those that were not were reduced in size. The following year the senate discussed two resolutions related to the review process of the preceding year. One resolution revised the guidelines for program review and elimination so that this process would not be connected with budgetary considerations. Faculty members who were initially

charged with reviewing some of the programs sponsored this resolution. This resolution was approved. A second resolution focused on criticizing the actions of the dean of the college of arts and sciences for his actions during the program review process (Castor and Cooren, 2006). This resolution was not approved.

The discussion analyzed in this project illustrates how questioning may be used to construct a crisis in its early stages beginning with Smith's resolution in December, followed by his questioning in January, followed by additional faculty questioning in March. In the case described here, the efficacy of the questioning is subject to debate given that there was not an immediate change in actions. However, questioning functioned in other vital ways to negotiate the social order of the institution by calling for accounts from others, challenging actions, attempting to shape a future course of action, and judging others' actions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Earlier versions of this article were presented to the annual conferences of the Western Speech Communication Association, Pasadena, CA, February 1996, and the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA, May 2007.

NOTES

1. 'Public University' is a pseudonym.
2. The state legislature, prompted by a citizens' referendum, approved a policy that would place a cap on state spending for publicly funded agencies in order to limit property taxes.
3. Names are pseudonyms.
4. The senate that Castor and Cooren (2006) refer to is the same senate that is analyzed in this article. The specific decision analyzed by Castor and Cooren is actually a retrospective evaluation of the actions of one administrator, the dean of the college of arts and science, during the program elimination and review process.

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