

# LANGUAGE USE DURING SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

## Understanding Controversies of and About Communication

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*Governing boards serve an important policy-making function in for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental sectors. Boards may consist of members from diverse backgrounds whose only common tie is board membership, making them particularly susceptible to misunderstandings and miscommunication. This project examines a school board's discussion of a communication policy as a way of understanding the communication problems that the board had recently experienced. A relationally responsive social constructionist perspective is applied to analyze board members' talk during a meeting and how meanings of communication and the communication problem are discursively negotiated in the interactions of board members. The analysis describes differing contexts of accountability to which board members orient in their organizational communication practices; these contexts consist of the organizational and the political.*

**Keywords:** meetings; social constructionism; school boards; metacommunication; problem formulation

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On June 5, 2002, Midwest Unified School District<sup>1</sup> (MUSD) Superintendent A resigned his position in a dramatic close to a school board meeting. As described the following day in the local newspaper,

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[A], hired as interim chief in late July 2001, said he became frustrated Tuesday night during a board meeting called to consider budget cuts. He wrote his resignation out long-hand on a sheet of yellow legal paper and handed it to board president [B] when the meeting ended after midnight Wednesday.

During the months following the resignation, the MUSD school board received increasing criticism, internally and externally, of its communication. Superintendent A had described the communication problems as being that school board members showed “a lack of respect and [have] been verbally abusive.” The board also received criticism for micro-managing through the direct involvement of board members in the operation of schools, thereby undermining the administration. In August 2002, the new interim superintendent, C, presented a proposal to the school board to change the current policy on communication procedures between the district staff to the school board to address some of the communication problems in the organization.

School boards are an example of a hybrid organizational group in which membership consists of individuals representing diverse backgrounds and stakeholders. Examples of these groups include governing boards, cross-functional organizational teams, and interorganizational collaborations. All of these groups face the similar challenge of needing to act as a unit to accomplish organizational goals while at the same time consisting of members from diverse backgrounds who may have their own individual goals and/or assumptions that they bring to bear from their other group identities. These differences in turn can result in communication problems.

The purpose of this project is to apply a relationally responsive social constructionist approach, as articulated by Shotter and associates (Cunliffe, 2001, 2002; Shotter, 1993a, 1993b, 2004, 2005) in the analysis of a school board’s discussion of a communication policy. Generally, a constructionist perspective assumes that social reality is created, maintained, and negotiated through the interactions and discursive practices of social actors (Burr, 1995). The relationally responsive perspective highlights the interconnection between interaction, context, and social accountability, making it particularly apropos for understanding group meetings in which multiple contextual factors are at play. The discussion of a communication policy provides an exemplary discursive site for describing participants’ conceptualizations of communication and of their problems associated with communication.

The main rationale for this project is that understanding assumptions related to communication is crucial for understanding how communication

may be used to maintain or change conflicts among board members and other groups with diverse representation. Although this study focuses on a school board, the results from this project can be used to understand the communication dynamics of other boards and hybrid decision-making groups more generally.

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In the following sections, I further situate the research context by reviewing other studies related to hybrid groups. The second section describes the relationally responsive social constructionist approach and presents conceptual framing for the social construction of communication problems. These concepts are then applied to a case study of a school board's discussion of an organizational communication policy. In applying the relationally responsive social constructionist approach, I identify how school board members with divergent positions present themselves as socially accountable by orienting to different contexts of accountability that include the organizational and political.

### **COMMUNICATION IN HYBRID ORGANIZATIONAL GROUPS**

In describing related studies on hybrid organizational interactions, I review studies that focus on language use and social interaction in intra-organizational and interorganizational meetings. Collectively, these studies highlight how communication problems in these meetings can be understood in terms of differences in discourse communities, codes of communication, cultural logics, and/or language use. In other words, they highlight how assumptions regarding communication are interrelated with misalignments in communication.

Palmeri (2004) describes a discourse community as consisting of "a group of people who share common assumptions about the discourse conventions

and standards of evidence that must be employed for a written text to claim authority as knowledge” (p. 39). In examining interprofessional collaborative writing in a law firm oriented toward medical cases, Palmeri describes how the different discourse communities of the legal professionals, medical professionals, and writers presented challenges when members worked together on collaborative writing projects. These differences included preferences regarding quantity of writing, types of details to convey, and writing style. According to Palmeri, because of their different discourse communities, writing team members had different criteria for what and how to write. Expectations for appropriate ways to communicate were contingent on the background discourse community of the organizational member.

In a similar vein, ethnographers of communication have examined organizational interactions in times of disagreement. These disagreements can be understood through the different codes of communication used by organizational members. For example, Baxter (1993) identified competing codes of collegiality versus bureaucracy regarding university governance among faculty and administration. Carbaugh (1988), in examining communication at a public television station, analyzed how members of the station viewed others at the station in different group categories.

One commonality in examining organizational communication differences in terms of discourse communities and codes of communication is the emphasis on organizational culture. More broadly, other studies have identified how differences in culture or cultural logics can be used to understand conflicts in hybrid groups. Miller (1994) identified how ethnic cultural differences regarding the meaning of meetings were related to misunderstandings among Japanese and American coworkers. Bennington, Shetler, and Shaw (2003) and Gephart, Steier, and Lawrence (1990) each examined interorganizational interactions related to public discussions of environmental problems. Both also described the conflicts among various organizational members in terms of cultural differences or cultural logics.

Some studies also identified how, more generally, language use can help in understanding problematic communication situations in hybrid group interactions. Milburn, Kenefick, and Lambert (2005) analyzed the challenges associated with collaboration during a board of directors' retreat for a family center. In particular, the criticisms and style of speaking of one individual caused difficulties in achieving a collaborative frame during the retreat. Mehan (1983) examined school meetings among teachers, counselors, and parents to determine whether certain children should be placed in special education classes. Mehan noted various language styles used by participants and how decisions tended to correlate with the wishes of individuals who used more professional sounding language.

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The work of Tracy and associates (Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001; Tracy & Muller, 2001; Tracy & Standerfer, 2003) is most relevant to this project given their focus on school board interactions and problematic communication. Developing and applying an action-implicative discourse analytic approach, Tracy and associates described the interconnection between communication practices, problems of communication, and situated ideals. With regard to communication problems, at play in this area for Tracy and associates' research subjects is identity presentation while balancing multiple goals.

One exception to the focus on identifying problems of communication in hybrid groups is Cooren (2004a, 2004b). In examining discussions of a board for a drug rehabilitation center, Cooren identified how the board achieves "collective minding." Of particular note from Cooren's study was that coordination among board members was not a pre-existing state but was instead worked out in the process of discussion, turn by turn.

The preceding studies collectively illustrate the prevalence of hybrid group interactions in a range of organizational contexts. In addition, they show the significance of language use, interaction, and culture or community in understanding conflict and communication problems. A relationally responsive social constructionist approach adds another layer of understanding to the described studies by focusing on context and accountability. The relationally responsive approach will be explained in greater detail to elaborate on how this approach can contribute to the understanding of hybrid group interactions.

## **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING**

### Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism

Social constructionism as a general perspective views reality as created, maintained, and/or transformed through communication (Burr, 1995; Carey, 1988; Gergen, 1985, 1999; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995). The relationally responsive social constructionist perspective is based on Shotter's work

(Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter, 1993a, 1993b, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005) and draws from various scholars, including Bakhtin, Vico, Volosinov, Vygotsky, and Wittgenstein. Working originally from the field of psychology, Shotter (1984, 1993b) focused on the social construction of individual identity and interpersonal relationships. However, more recent discussions of relationally responsive social constructionism have addressed organizational contexts (i.e., Castor, 2005; Cunliffe, 2001, 2002; Holman & Thorpe, 2003; Shotter, 1998, 2004, 2005, 2006). It is important to note that Shotter never intended for his work to be viewed as a formal theory but instead as a "critical tool-box" whose concepts should be selectively used. Therefore, in this overview, I selectively address some of the concepts of relationally responsive social constructionism as they relate to the analytic focus of this project. The concepts of interest include joint action, responsiveness, and social accountability. After describing these concepts, I compare and contrast relationally responsive social constructionism with similar approaches to explain the utility of this approach for this project.

The relationally responsive approach explains social construction processes as based on the joint actions of "persons-in-conversation." Interaction is the primary basis for understanding such processes because it is in the give and take of interaction that interlocutors develop and negotiate their understanding of meaning. Because multiple parties are involved, unintended consequences may result from interactions as both parties share control for the conversation and therefore cannot control or predict the outcome. As Shotter (2005) states, "for, whether we like it or not, the fact is that we are always 'entangled' or 'entwined' in a ceaseless flow of relational background activity going on between ourselves and the realities of the others and othernesses around us" (p. 114). The process of socially constructing reality is a relational activity because it occurs in a context that includes multiple others.

Although constructing social reality is a relational process, it is also a responsive process. Drawing from Marx, Shotter (1993a) explains that individuals may make choices but not necessarily in circumstances of their choosing. People operate from within a "landscape" or "sea"<sup>2</sup> of "enablements" and "constraints." Therefore, although individuals may shape a situation through their utterances, they are in turn constrained (Shotter, 1993b). Using Bakhtin's discussion of the utterance, Shotter highlights how utterances must be responsive to the preceding context to be "taken seriously," and to be viewed as a legitimate member of society, one must be responsive to one's context (Shotter, 1993a). In this respect, social accountability is

related to social construction processes in that there are moral implications and obligations associated with communication. A relationally responsive approach privileges the social and balances creativity and constraint in social construction processes. Social construction practices must be understood within their context of occurrence as they address a past, are constrained by a past, and implicate future action.

As Cunliffe (2002) notes, relationally responsive social constructionism is very similar to other discourse analytic approaches, such as narrative analysis, textual analysis, and conversation analysis (also see Tracy, 1997). For example, the relationally responsive approach's focus on language in its moment of use is similar to the interest of conversation analysis in talk in interaction. It is also similar to the ethnography of communication in seeking to understand the cultural rules and premises that guide a community's communication. The most direct similarity is with action-implicative discourse analysis, mentioned earlier, which describes the interrelationship between communication practices, communication problems, and the situated ideals of a community.

For this project, I apply the relationally responsive perspective because it highlights accountability and its interrelationship with context. Although these topics may be addressed in the other approaches mentioned, they are not foregrounded. Also, although many approaches highlight culture as context, there are other factors that constitute context, such as past interactions. Finally, the relationally responsive approach focuses on understanding "from within" or on understanding communication practices and how they are intelligible to interlocutors. Although the ethnography of communication focuses on insider understandings, it is with the objective of understanding a community, whereas the relationally responsive approach can consider meaning at a smaller group unit of analysis, which is a particularly appropriate starting point for understanding disagreements within a group.

## Communication and Problem Talk

In this section, I highlight three points and present my research questions. First, communication itself is a socially constructed, socially meaningful concept. Second, problems are socially constructed. Third, talk about communication problems provides insight regarding participants' assumptions regarding appropriate communication conduct.

As Craig (2005) describes, we live in a communication culture in which talk about talk is pervasive. In particular, Craig notes that in contemporary

public discourse, there is a problem orientation to talk about talk in that communication is assumed to be a primary means for solving problem. However, as Craig points out, "these ideas are elements of a cultural pattern that has evolved in particular historical circumstances in close association with specific social practices and related cultural themes of human progress, modernization, and globalization" (p. 660). In other words, metacommunication or discourse about communication is culturally and historically situated.

Various cultural examples help to illustrate this point. Katriel (1986) described the significance of the term *dugri* in Israeli Sabra culture. *Dugri* is a direct way of speaking that evokes sincerity, assertiveness, and solidarity. Katriel explicates how this form of speaking is interconnected with Israeli identity in light of its cultural history. Katriel and Philipsen (1981) described how, among their American research subjects, "communication" had a distinctive meaning that differed from other ways of speaking such as "small talk," "mere talk," and "chit-chat." Specifically, when one "communicates," it is to develop relational closeness and to express one's unique identity. Terms that reference talk or other forms of communication are significant as they implicate notions of personhood or identity, social relations, and social action.

Although communication about communication is revealing regarding a group's assumptions, talk about problems is significant in highlighting a group's premises and values. Schön (1983) points out that problems are not described, as much as they are constructed or "set." This claim is a distinctly ontological claim regarding the nature of reality. Rather than viewing problems as having an independent existence apart from humans, Schön views problems as indeterminate, ambiguous situations that are identified as problems through a discursive process: "Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them" (p. 40).

Buttny (2004) as well as Craig and Tracy (1995; Tracy, 1995) highlight the interconnection between problem-talk and a community's morals. As Buttny explains,

Morality is inextricably bound up with social interaction. What counts as a problem implicates some sense of morality or protomorality (Bergmann, 1998, as cited in Buttny, 2004). Problems and their implicated moral systems are seen by the speech activities of praise or blame, approval or disapproval, respect or disrespect. A people's morality or protomorality gets displayed through their discursive assessments, evaluations, or judgments of actions or persons. (p. 4)

In other words, when a group talks about a problem, they are socially constructing (or reconstructing) more general assumptions. The analysis of talk about problems can provide insight into what members of a community take as premises and guidelines for conduct.

When combined, talk about communication problems becomes a rich discursive site for understanding views regarding appropriate communication conduct. I apply a relationally responsive social constructionist approach to a case study of a hybrid group discussing a communication problem to highlight the following features. As a social constructionist perspective, the relationally responsive approach is sensitive to the social construction of reality, including meanings for communication and problems. More specifically, the relationally responsive approach highlights the role of responsiveness to context in understanding interlocutors' communication practices. This responsiveness can also be understood as a way of demonstrating social accountability.

In applying the relationally responsive approach, I pose the following research questions:

- RQ1:* What are school board members' conceptualizations of communication?
- RQ2:* What are school board members' formulations of their communication problem?
- RQ3:* What do board members' formulation of communication and their problem implicate regarding notions of social accountability?

The first two questions are descriptive in nature and focus on the meanings that board members convey. The third research question attempts to analyze the divergent positions of board members and how they are, respectively, intelligible given specific notions of accountability.

## **CASE STUDY: THE MUSD SCHOOL BOARD COMMUNICATION POLICY**

### MUSD and Its School Board

The MUSD is among the five largest school districts in its state, serving a student population of approximately 21,000 and a community population of 120,000. The district consists of 24 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, 1 sixth-through-eighth-grade charter school academy, 4 high schools, 1 high school technology academy, 1 special education center, 2 elementary charter schools, and 1 Head Start Child Development Center.

There were seven school board members elected from the community. Regular school board meetings were held once a month, open to the public, and broadcast on the district's own television channel. The board also held other meetings such as committee meetings, special board meetings that were open to the public and called by the board president, in addition to executive sessions that were closed to the public.

Regular board meetings took place in a large meeting room in the school district administration building, with the seven school board members and superintendent seated in the front of the room at a table on a raised dais. In front of the main table, six smaller tables were positioned that were arranged in three rows of two and seated administrative staff and other individuals designated to provide information on some of the topics for the meeting. Rows of chairs for the general public to sit were located behind the tables.

### Recent Historical Context

The sudden, unanticipated resignation of Superintendent A was a catalyst prompting increased community criticism of the board. According to the local newspaper, problems of communication within the board were a reason for the district's inability to attract and retain a superintendent before, during, and after A's resignation. The image of the board and its members' abilities to communicate with each other was not helped when, after a public event, one board member was overheard calling two other board members "f\*\*\*ing idiots," as reported in the local newspaper. The board member later clarified that she called her fellow board members "fricking idiots" and that she regretted her words. The problems associated with the school board prompted an unsuccessful recall effort of two board members.

During the August 2002 meeting of the school board, interim Superintendent C and the executive director of special projects, D, presented for discussion and action a proposed policy change affecting staff communication in the school district to the school board (see the appendix). On the agenda, the proposal was introduced as follows:

The Board of Education supports an orderly and expeditious process of communication from staff members. Policy and rule 4211 Staff Communications to the School Board addresses this issue. Attached are revisions to the policy and rule which further defines the process. Guidelines state that information will be distributed to school board members through the Office of the Superintendent.

Administration Recommendation. Administration recommends that the Board approve the revised Policy and Rule 4211 Staff Communications to the School Board on a first reading and forward to the Board for a second reading.

The proposal called for deleting one sentence in the current policy stating that employees would not be prohibited from contacting school board members directly. Regarding this change, the interim superintendent stated that it was not a change in policy per se but an alteration of emphasis. The other proposed change to the policy would centralize and systematize the distribution of reports and other information from district staff to school board members by assigning that responsibility to the superintendent's office.

### **METHOD OF DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS**

From 2002 to 2003, I videotaped regular meetings of the school board that were televised and collected local newspaper articles on the school board. Background information regarding the school district was also obtained from the district's Web site. For this project, I focused on the school board's discussion of the proposed change to the communication policy. I attended and took field notes of the meeting. From a video recording of the televised meeting, a student assistant transcribed the discussion, focusing on the verbal communication of school board members.<sup>3</sup> The resulting transcript is 17 single-spaced pages. Because of the focus on word choice in characterizing communication and problem formulation, the transcript is mainly of verbal communication. Limited notations of nonverbal communication are included; these notations are indicated as they occur in the presented data excerpts.

Regarding method of analysis, an inductive, grounded theory approach was used to identify themes with respect to how interlocutors described communication and their problem (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, using the term *communication* as a focal term, I identified the related meanings associated with that term (Bennington et al., 2003). These related meanings were read and reread to develop category labels. Second, in identifying how participants described their problem, I focused on key terms used by participants in their own problem definitions and examined related meanings associated with those terms. Following the criteria outlined by Owen (1984), a general theme was considered relevant if it met the three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. I also paid attention to the variations among participants in terms of how they defined a given

theme. Sometimes, an individual board member had a unique definition for a theme that differed from other board members.

As a final part of my analysis, I considered what the meanings for communication and the problems implied regarding how participants interpreted the context to which they were being responsive. Following Buttny (1993), who asks, "What do accounts make relevant?" I asked in my interpretive analysis, "What do participants' meanings for communication and their communication problems make relevant regarding their context?" In this respect, I sought to understand how participants were responsive to their contexts.

## **OVERVIEW OF DISCUSSION**

Nine individuals participated in the discussion of the proposed policy change: the seven school board members, the interim superintendent, and a district instructional administrator. The discussion was extremely controversial, with the policy change failing by a four-to-three vote.

The interim superintendent presented the policy change, citing that it would assist in using the "chain of command" and would provide "a consistent method of communicating with the school board." Those who supported the policy (the board president, B., and Board Members E and F) supported the idea of improving efficiency in how staff communicated with the board and also supported the idea of ensuring that information relevant to board discussions was distributed in a systematic way to all board members. Those who opposed the changes did so for a variety of reasons, such as feeling that the policy change would inhibit open communication from the staff to the board, restrict the rights of board members and district employees, and either unjustly punish employees or not punish them enough for violating the policy. In essence, there was not a convergence regarding reasons for opposing the policy. At a couple of points during the discussion, the policy change needed to be clarified for board members. One board member felt it would restrict community members from communicating with her. However, the board president clarified that the policy pertained only to district employees.

### Meanings of Communication

There were two main ways in which board members and district administration described communication: as "chain of command" and as "open." The chain of command metaphor is significant given that it was

referenced a total of 11 times by three discussion participants. The “chain of command” referred to the organizational hierarchy of the district. The purpose of communication associated with this meaning was to convey information up and down the flow of the hierarchy. Order and the roles of individuals within the organization were emphasized.

Superintendent C first introduced the “chain of command” image in explaining what the policy change would mean:

And so what we’d like to do is to uh, take a look at the policies that involve **communication**<sup>4</sup> with the school board, make sure that they’re clean and that there’s a uh, uh, a clear, uh, **chain of command** that employees can follow and that we uh, accept the responsibility to uh, make sure that all of the employees have that voice and that we communicate with them.

According to the superintendent, the chain of command is meant to facilitate “voice” on the part of district employees by providing clarity regarding procedures. The chain of command image functions not only to explain the policy proposal but also to define communication in a particular way—as information flow up and down a chain of command.

A second view of communication was that of communication as “open.” In one sense, openness referred to talking to the appropriate people to accomplish a specific task. A second sense of openness focused on relationships between people as individuals in a more personal orientation. Openness was used as justification both for and against the policy change.

In the following excerpt, one board member explains how the policy change would result in an opening of communication:

If anything, what I really think this does, and I wanted to **open** up, so that people are asking the right people and that there are lines of **communication** throughout this district. And if somebody needs something, they feel they can<sup>5</sup> go to the people above them in their individual sites, whether that’s here at the ESC building, or whether that’s out at individual schools.

In relating “openness,” the policy is defined as enabling communication by providing guidance to employees on to whom they should communicate when they experience a problem.

However, openness was also used as a reason for opposing the resolution:

I cannot function as a school board member if this passes. Um, this is one of the most serious policies to come in front of me yet. I, um, maintain, I think, a very **open** relationship with employees of this district, and, ah, and I like that.

In the preceding statement, this board member is first recognizing the importance of efforts to improve communication in the school district. However, she contrasts that effort with her efforts to have an “open relationship” with employees of the school district. By implication, the policy proposal would result in a closing of openness and open relationships between district employees and school board members. Accordingly, ideal communication involves being able to talk directly with anyone in the school district, regardless of position. Communication is prioritized for its ability to make contact with others.

Board members on the different sides of the policy change agreed that openness was important; however, they disagreed in how the policy was connected with facilitating open communication. This disagreement can be better understood by examining participants’ implicit meanings for communication and what constituted openness. The meaning of “openness” varied depending on whether board members assumed an emphasis on communication as information transmission or as relational. In the former definition, openness is achieved when information can flow up and down a “chain of command.” In the latter sense of communication as relational, the emphasis is on allowing communication to forge and create relationships.

### Problem Formulation

There were two main ways in which the communication problem of the school board was described: as a struggle over identity alignment and as micromanagement. “Struggle over identity alignment” was not a phrase used by board members but a researcher-developed term to describe one theme of problem formulation. In this theme, school board members described different stakeholder groups with whom they saw themselves as primarily working in their roles as board members. The different stakeholder groups were district administration and employees of the school district, parents, community members, and students. Micromanagement dealt primarily with the issue of control and who or what groups could or should take what actions. Each of these problem formulations implicates an assessment of the kind of communication that should occur between groups and appropriate forms of social action.

In discussing the need to align with administration, board members highlighted expectations of how the board should communicate with the administration by working together with the administration and showing respect:

We need to start uh, working together as a team with administration and we need to have everybody do the same, we need uh, all lines of, uh,

every, everyone needs to do that, from the parents to the teachers, to the administrators. . . .

In aligning with administration and describing how they must work “as a team with administration,” this school board member voiced a need to have connectedness and work as a unit with the district administration. This alignment is basically with the school district as an organization.

Aligning with the administration is also a way to show support. The impact of this would be to demonstrate to outsiders that board members do support district leaders:

In my uh, two and a half years, I’ve seen a lot of disrespect for our superintendents, I’ve seen a lot of disrespect uh, for principals. And I think the message has to go out uh, that we do have competent capable individuals manning our schools and also, uh, we have competent people leading our schools, and if there’s a problem at the uh, school level, that principal needs to um, be respected.

This board member’s comment, while generally addressing the idea of respect, can also be read as being responsive to the recent historical context of the earlier interim superintendent resigning and accusations from the local paper of the board’s communication being a detrimental factor in recruiting a new superintendent.

In aligning with administration, school board members assumed “good faith” with respect to administration within the school district. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) explain, one of the characteristics of an institutional organization, such as an educational organization, is that different parts of the system are decoupled with each other. As such, to function, members must assume that others in the system are working in good faith to keep the organization in order.

However, other board members did not align with administration:

The other thing, that’s a problem, is the omission of information that if, if we are to be fed, one source and that’s to determine um, how we vote on an issue, um, I’m just telling you that it’s insufficient evidence. It’s insufficient information and if you do your homework on, on the issues that come before you, it’s illogical to accept one source of information.

In the preceding statement, this school board member took a more suspicious stance with respect to trusting administration by highlighting how, if passed, the proposal would result in board members being “fed” information from only “one source.”

The different ways that identity alignment was described highlight different views regarding the relationship between the board and district and the kind of communication that should occur between the board and others. In aligning with administration, board members assumed that the administration could be trusted to work in good faith for the interest of the district. Administration was assumed to be in a collaborative relationship with the school board. In contrast, in voicing suspicion regarding receiving information exclusively through the superintendent office, an implicit message was communicated that the administration needed to be viewed more skeptically. The tension between trust and skepticism of the district administration was also voiced in the struggle related to a second problem—that of micromanagement.

Micromanagement was described as a second problem with which the school board must deal, but it was related in different ways to the discussion. The school board had been accused of micromanagement in the local newspaper. Some board members claimed that the proposed policy change would be one way for the school board to respond to that accusation. However, one board member attempted to use the idea of micromanagement to critique the proposed policy change, claiming that if approved, the policy would result in micromanagement:

Well, there's talk of **micromanaging** and yet rule 4211 that's exactly what you're doing if you support this, because if you recall, when Dr. [inaudible] came in to office, he informed each and every one of us that the way that he was going to do things was he was going to send out whatever went to one board member went to them all. Now, apparently, the board feels we need to make a rule, telling a superintendent to do that, so you will be in fact, **micromanaging** if you support this.

The attempt to define the policy as an instance of micromanagement was unsuccessful as two other board members directly countered this idea by defining micromanagement in alternative ways:

I don't see anything in this policy that deals with the question of **micromanagement**. **Micromanagement** occurs for two reasons, one, people don't get honest and open information, people distrust what they get, or they really want to run the district.

I think when we talk about **micromanaging**, um, we need to remember um, tha-tha-that's really when, when you're outside of your role and your responsibility and as board members, I think were all pretty clear, we've been on this board long enough, that we know what we're here to do and what our, what our uh, task is to do here.

In contrast with the general definition of micromanagement as exerting any control, the two board members quoted above defined micromanagement in more specific ways that involved trust and organizational roles. Although the issue of micromanagement was not an explicit part of the original policy change, board members addressed micromanagement as showing a responsiveness to a larger context in two ways. First, the discussion was responsive to some of the criticisms of the school board conveyed in the local newspapers. The interlocutors related micromanagement to the discussion to demonstrate that they do not micromanage the school district. Second and more specifically, the term *micromanagement* functioned as a negative label such that if a situation was successfully defined as micromanagement, then it had a negative value associated with it. Micromanagement implied a misuse of control and/or a lack of knowledge of one's organizational responsibilities. The term *micromanagement* tapped into a broader cultural understanding of micromanagement as an undesirable way to run an organization. Therefore, the attempt to label a situation as an instance of micromanagement is an attempt to define social reality in a particular way that implicates social action—action is warranted to change or prevent an instance of micromanagement.

School board members formulated their communication problems in terms of identity alignment and micromanagement. Both of these formulations point to certain ways of communicating within and outside of the organization. Identity alignment can implicate a cooperative stance between the board and administration; alternatively, identity alignment, when the interests of stakeholders outside of the administration are prioritized, can implicate an adversarial position between the board and administration and closer alignment of the board as representatives of the community. Micromanagement was interconnected with the issue of control and, by extension, the definition of roles and responsibilities within the organization. Micromanagement was highlighted as a communication-related problem of the board because micromanagement involved what type of demands might be put on organizational members by board members.

### Social Accountability and Communication Problems

In analyzing board members' conceptualizations of communication and their communication problem, there are certain notions of social accountability that can be inferred. Board members' talk may be viewed as sensible in light of specific contexts of accountability. In the descriptions of communication and of the communication problem, there was a tension

between arguments favoring the organizational versus the political.<sup>6</sup> For example, the discussion of communication functioning in a chain of command, of openness in talking to appropriate organizational members, identity alignment with administration, and micromanagement as stepping outside of your organizational role all oriented to the school board as part of the larger organization of the school district. Alternatively, the discussion of openness in talking with any one in the community, identity alignment with staff and community members, and micromanagement as control all oriented to the school board as a political entity in representing the community.

Board members, in their discussion of communication and their communication problems, were demonstrating social accountability by being responsive to their context. But members were responsive to different contexts constituted by the organizational and the political. In the case of this specific discussion, orientation to these different frames contributed to disagreements among the board members regarding the change in the staff to board communication policy. The existence of these two frames, of the organizational and political, is understandable given the historical context of school boards in the United States. As Howell (2005) and Mathews (1996) explain, school boards initially came into being as an instrument of the community to govern schools, and their responsibilities included hiring and firing, curriculum, writing budgets, and levying taxes. However, with the rise of Taylorism in the beginning of the 19th century, it became increasingly acceptable to have standards of scientific management and professionalism dominate the discourse of public school governance.

This dual identification between the organizational and the political highlights a dilemma of school boards and some other hybrid decision-making groups. One responsibility of boards is to provide guidance and set policy with respect to their organization. However, board members are involved also to represent community stakeholders outside of the immediate organizational context. Therefore, to represent the interests of those stakeholders responsibly, they may need to take an adversarial stance with regard to the organization. In this respect, the model of some organizations functioning on "good faith" works against the idea of a board functioning as the guardian of the organization. This is similar to the dichotomy that Baxter (1993) described regarding a conflict among faculty and administrators in a university. On one hand, faculty felt that there should be minimal written policies so faculty members could be treated as individuals and to show that they were trusted to do their jobs; alternatively, administrators favored a

bureaucratic approach with codified policies to ensure that all were treated fairly and evenly. As described earlier, Baxter identified these differences as being interconnected with competing codes of communication held by faculty and university administrators. For this project, I do not describe the differences among board members as resulting from codes of communication; however, this case study highlights how board members may emphasize one context of accountability over another in how they define their responsibilities and in their assumptions regarding how to communicate with various organizational stakeholders.

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School boards operate at the intersection of the public and the organizational. As elected officials, they represent the community in influencing policy pertaining to the public education of a community's children. However, school districts also operate from an organizational model. As such, school board members may be drawing from different frames or assumptions regarding their roles. In one situation, school board members may orient more strongly to their roles in connection with affecting the district as an organization. As a result, board members may focus more on terms and meanings that assume a business orientation and a hierarchical notion of organization and procedure. Alternatively, school board members may orient more strongly to their roles as representatives of the community. A consequence of this could be a watchdog stance regarding district personnel and a prioritizing of making and maintaining interpersonal connections in the community. The discussion analyzed in this article illustrates how, despite their differences, school board members' comments may be read as socially accountable. However, members were being accountable to different contexts, one emphasizing the organization and the other the community. Given that both contexts are significant, particularly in a community group setting, it is important to be able to strike an appropriate balance between the two to work through controversy.

## DISCUSSION

### Practical Implications

In one sense, school boards are unique in their highly public nature and in the sensitivity that a community has for the main concern of a school board in overseeing the education of its children. However, school boards share some features in common with other organizational groups. School boards are a specific type of governing board, similar to other governing boards in (ideally) membership diversity and responsibilities for policy setting. More generally, school boards are similar to hybrid organizational groups such as interdepartmental teams or interorganizational collaboration groups. Each must cope with the tension of balancing multiple goals drawn from multiple group memberships. Although these other groups may not be like school boards in addressing the same issues, they may be similar in having to deal with the same dynamics. In other words, members of hybrid decision-making groups will have multiple contexts to which they will orient, and these multiple contexts of accountability can contribute to misunderstandings and conflict within the group.

A second implication of this project is in providing an understanding of the interrelationship between discourse and decision making. Simon (1976) calls attention to the fact that decision making is contingent on the decision-making premises of organizational actors. In line with the discursive turn in organizational studies, researchers have illustrated how organizational members' discourse is interrelated with organizational decision making (i.e., Castor, 2005; Jabs, 2005; O'Connor, 1997). This project illustrates how the discursive resources of terms for talk and ways of formulating problems are interrelated with interlocutors' premises and models of organizing. A focus on "communication" or other terms for talk is significant given the rich implications of these for understanding the construction of identity, relationships, and social action. A focus on problems, as explained by Tracy (1995), can make explicit participants' norms or ideals regarding organizational interactions.

A third implication deals with understanding the role of multiple stakeholders in organizational decision making (Deetz, 1992, 1995). This study illustrates the challenge of addressing the needs and interests of multiple stakeholders, such as district employees, administration, and other community members, during meetings. Haas and Deetz (2000) highlight how communication practices such as dialogue can contribute constructively to ethical

decision making. This project calls attention to how meaning negotiation is related to a group's ability to engage in dialogue. For example, although school board members were using similar terms, this analysis illustrates how those terms had different meanings for various participants (also see Bennington et al., 2003). In the case of a community group consisting of a diverse membership, these same differences of meaning can result.

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Another practical implication deals with format for discussion. Aside from discussing the specific policy, the discussion focused more generally around communication problems in the district and frustrations that board members had with those. However, the policy changes were not approved, and the more significant communication problems of the school board members were not actually resolved during the meeting. This circumstance points to the limitations of the discussion format. The discussion of the policy change occurred using a very structured procedure for discussion. This limited comments to two per board member under a specified time limit. This type of format does not lead to dialogue but rather to mini-speeches. For addressing problems within the school board, an alternative discussion format or separate session could help in addressing the core of the issue or problem.<sup>7</sup>

### Limitations

One limitation of this project is its focus on the discussion from one meeting. Information from other meetings and interviews with board members, district personnel, and/or community members would have yielded other interesting data to get at the perceptions of research subjects and to gain a longitudinal perspective. Despite this limitation, the advantage of focusing on a single meeting is that it features the public discourse of board members

on the specific topic of communication. In discussing a communication problem, board members articulated their assumptions and ideals regarding communication in the district. The public discourse on communication provides an exemplary case for examining board members' conceptualizations of social accountability with respect to their communication.

A second limitation deals with the very specific nature of the context of a school board. The specific contextual frames of orienting to the organizational versus the political can apply to other school boards but possibly not to very many other hybrid groups. Alternatively, the more general analytic framework of examining discourse related to a communication problem can provide a heuristic for understanding disagreements in other hybrid groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this project was to apply a relationally responsive social constructionist perspective to examining a school board's discussion of a communication policy change presented to address the communication problems within the organization. In applying a relationally responsive approach, I wished to analyze how discussion of a communication problem can be understood in relation to multiple contexts. The ways that school board members discursively negotiated the meanings of their communication problem illustrate a heterogeneous nature regarding responsiveness. In presenting themselves as accountable, albeit in different ways, the board members illustrated a responsiveness to key assumptions regarding organizational operations and community concerns.

Ultimately, there was a mismatch between the policy proposal and the key issues of difference among board members. Although the policy could have had a structural impact, the issues of disagreement among the school board members centered more fundamentally around their assumptions regarding models of organizing and stakeholder accountability (Zarefsky, 1993). These differences were illustrated by focusing on key terms and, more importantly, the different ways that the meanings for those terms were worked out in the actual, joint actions of the board members. Although this project focused on a single case of a school board's discussion during a meeting, a sensitivity to assumptions regarding communication and models of organizing, as illustrated through problem formulation, can be helpful in understanding interactions in other hybrid groups.

**APPENDIX**  
**School Board Communication Policy: Policy**  
**and Rule 4211 Staff Communications**  
**to the School Board**

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Changes proposed to second paragraph:\*

Communications and reports to the Board from principals, other administrators and supervisors, teachers or other staff members shall be submitted through the Superintendent of Schools when Board action is requested or expected. ~~This is not to be interpreted to preclude any employee in the District from contacting an individual Board member with a concern.~~

**RULE 4211, GUIDELINE #1**

Administrators and other staff members providing formal or informal reports or other information in response to the Board's request should provide complete, accurate information regarding their specific area of responsibility. *All information should be submitted to the office of the Superintendent for distribution to the Board.*

**RULE 4211, GUIDELINE #3**

Requests for information by individual Board members should be limited to easily and quickly retrievable information. Requests requiring research or report preparation shall be compiled upon majority vote of the Board. *This information should be submitted to the office of the Superintendent for distribution to the Board.*

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\*Note: Strike-through text indicates lines that would be deleted from the old policy. Text in italics indicates lines that would be added.

**NOTES**

1. Pseudonyms for people, places, and organizations are used to protect the anonymity of research participants.
2. Shotter has used the images of both sea and landscape to describe social life. When drawing from Wittgenstein, Shotter has mainly used the image of "landscape" as that concept is derived from Wittgenstein's work.
3. I would like to thank and acknowledge my student assistants, Kimberly Fosco, Tianna Sinnans, and Heather Thompson, for their work in transcribing the school board meeting video recordings. Tianna Sinnans transcribed the meeting of focus in this analysis. Their

work was supported by grants from the University of Wisconsin System Plan 2008 Diversity Monitoring and Assessment Committee.

4. Bolding is used to highlight certain terms from the transcription. These are terms the researcher highlighted rather than participant-emphasized terms.

5. Underlining indicates verbal emphasis on the part of research participants.

6. I wish to thank and acknowledge one of the reviewers for his/her feedback to help draw out the significance of the different organizational and political contexts.

7. I would like to recognize my independent study students Stephanie Holland and Jennifer Uttech for their insights regarding how meeting format can contribute to conflict.

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