

Chapter 26

Understanding Institutions’ Rhetorical Agency

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a view of the common conceptual ground, the “Really Big Question,” that links the chapters in this and its companion volume. Do institutions have rhetorical agency? Beginning with a discussion of a “Really Big Question” about why it might matter to scholars from multiple fields who share an interest in the language of institutions, this chapter identifies resolutions consistently offered throughout the DICTION-based scholarship presented here. It also considers some of the implications, with particular attention to what it reveals about the instrumental and constitutive functions of institutional language. The chapter concludes with three questions that remain, underscoring both the strengths and limitations of the research DICTION enables.

INTRODUCTION

All scholarly disciplines have Really Big Questions. I do not refer to their anxieties of the moment, such as declining access to federal funding or questions about the methodology behind department rankings, but instead the enduring, thorny intellectual conundrums that more-or-less animate their field of inquiry. Philosophers wonder about the nature of life well lived, for example, while sociologists ask how humans arrange and conduct themselves collectively as they live it, even as cell biologists search for clues in life’s smallest forms about how to sustain it throughout the planet. As these examples suggest, Really Big Questions both identify and differentiate disciplines, and

they have implications for research design within them. Some Big Questions promote critical or qualitative inquiry (e.g., “what is the meaning or nature of Thing A?”) while others demand quantitative methods (e.g., “what is the frequency or significance of Thing B?”). All of this is as it should be. As I have argued elsewhere (Beasley, 2011), research design should follow and flow from a larger research question, not vice versa. In other words, just because we can use a particular methodology to do research doesn’t mean that we should; there has to be an argument about why the research should be done. Even so, it is also true that much research stops short of providing definitive or even clear answers to the Really Big Questions. The questions therefore continue to beckon, generation after generation, across time, method and controversy.

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It was no Really Big Question that drew scholars to Austin, Texas, in February 2013 for a conference entitled “The Language of Institutions: DICTION Studies.” It was, instead, a hammer. Scholars came from different disciplines and from different countries to talk about how they had used the same tool, the DICTION computer-aided text analysis program created by Roderick P. Hart in the 1970s, long before their research projects--and, in a few cases, they themselves--were conceived. They came to Austin thinking about master variables, the trade-offs between human and computer-assisted coding, and how to build dictionaries that could help us understand the nature, functions and limits of public communication within a variety of institutional settings. They brought completed research projects ready for presentation and discussion. Mostly, though, they wanted to talk about how they had used that hammer and see how others had done so, too.

They brought some doubts as well. You could sense it at the beginning of the conference especially. How would the finance professors interested in optimal portfolio construction be able to talk to the rhetoric professor who was curious about whether or not university commencement speeches had changed over time? Sure, they could discuss the weather and maybe even basketball over hors d'oeuvres at the opening reception, but what would they say to each other if they got stuck in an elevator. They knew they shared no Really Big Questions. All they had in common was the hammer. Really, how far could it take them?

I had no hammer. I was there as a Synthesizer, meaning my job was to read the papers and then observe and listen as the researchers talked to and thought with each other. Having done so, I have concluded that the conferees were all engaged in the study of some version of the same Really Big Question, even if they didn't know it. It is a question about how language functions within institutions, as the conference title suggested, and

therefore, it is a question that does not belong to only one discipline. Yet it is far more consequential and complicated than its simple wording would suggest. The question is: Do institutions have rhetorical agency?

This chapter begins with a discussion of this question and why it might matter to scholars from multiple fields who share an interest in the language of institutions. Having argued for my sense of the common theoretical cause, I then point to an answer consistently offered throughout the chapters in these two volumes. Next, I consider the implications of this answer, with particular attention to what it reveals about the instrumental and constitutive functions of institutional language. The chapter concludes with three questions that remain, underscoring both the strengths and limitations of the research DICTION enables.

The Question, its Terms, and the Stakes

As mentioned, my view is that the Really Big Question at the heart of these two volumes is whether institutions have rhetorical agency. To be clear, this may not be the view of the authors of the chapters in this or its companion volume, who may not recognize this question or its terms. Likewise, it may not be the only Really Big Question that consistently hovered over the discussions during the conference. Ultimately, however, my strong sense is that the research presented here takes up this question and offers some compelling insights into it, leaving us with more than a simple yes-or-no answer, as I will explain. First, however, let's start with the basic iteration in order to understand the question's main terms as well as what is at stake in asking it.

The question has two parts. First, its subject: institutions. All of the chapters in these volumes have an explicit focus on institutions—which, for the purposes of this essay, I use as an umbrella

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