EDITORIAL

Blue, Orange, White, and Brown:
Causality, Values, and the Impact of Messages

It is a simple question. I ask the "teachers-to-be" in my university classes at the beginning of every term: "How many of you have benefited from exposure to hostile, negative, and caustic comments from a teacher?" I provide a second version: "How many of you find yourselves attending to a lesson and learning better *after* the teacher criticizes you or attempts to embarrass you in front of the class?" I give a third version: "How many of you have been made good by being told you were bad?"

I continually hope that these questions will refute the notion that threats and punishment are the proper strategies for managing a classroom of students and an effective way of promoting a learning environment. I have never had anyone tell me that they prefer learning within a caustic hurtful environment. So, my conclusion for them is, "Don't use threatening or hurtful strategies…you don't want them; your students will not want them either." These messages are convincing mainly based on personal values. Students, teachers, and I generally share the belief that kindness is a preferable state of affairs over hostility.

However, each of us can provide a plethora of examples where caustic teachers hurt, minimize students' willingness to learn, and make learning a miserable activity. If no one prefers the hostile stance, why do people use it, and where does it arise? It seems self-evident that banishing caustic remarks from learning environments is a minimal and necessary step to success. Yet, the road to dismissing caustic remarks is not without some hurdles to clear.

When I ask, "Has anyone ever profited by a caustic remark from a teacher," most students remain silent. However, I invariably (to my continual astonishment), have three or four out of every group raise their hands. One by one, each recounts an incident where a teacher was hurtful, spiteful, or just plain mean to them with the result that they became better students and better people. There is a caveat though. It is a common refrain, "I succeeded just out of spite!"

Can Cruel Be Cool?

If you have read much of invitational theory, this finding should present you with as much difficulty as it does me. A number of questions have plagued me for years: How can hurtful, caustic, and spiteful treatment of a student (or anyone for that matter) result in a person who is smarter, happier, healthier, and in general, better off? Are we to believe these students when they say that nasty teachers inspired them to do good work? Is it relevant that they did these good things, in their words, "out of spite"? How do caustic remarks, as one student put it, "Improve my behavior out of shame because my behavior *was* bad" and by implication, deserved mistreatment?

Examples of negative treatment inducing high levels of achievement abound in many

areas, particularly in sports and other highly competitive arenas. How do caustic remarks help make us better? If caustic treatment works in sports, is it true elsewhere? Can caustic treatment of children improve learning and satisfaction with life?

Invitational Education®, with the use of the "blue card/orange card" analogy, has a construct for thinking about messages we send and their effects. Essentially, orange cards are caustic and blue cards are nurturing. A blue message is a message of encouragement, support, and confidence. An orange message is an attempt to harm, belittle, or discourage. The theory is that blue cards build confidence, encourage effort, and provide a pleasant environment for learning. Orange, on the other hand, does exactly the opposite.

Unexpectedly, the blue message theory might explain why orange cards sometimes work, even though the theory itself describes orange cards as destructive. It is true enough that caustic comments were hurtful to most of the students who claimed that caustic messages inspired them toward improvement. An explanation for this phenomenon does not require that we toss away our blue message theory. We simply have to look at a different *source* for the blue messages that *did* inspire them. In each case where students were treated caustically by their teachers and claimed positive benefits, the *student*, as a mindfully independent individual, was the primary source of the encouraging blue cards that we believe assist in learning success. For example, while the teacher sends a demeaning message, the student simply rejects it and inserts in its place affirming messages originating from the self. Students confirm this theory in most, but not all, cases.

Some students also state that they discounted the teacher's nastiness because a different teacher, either past or present, expressed confidence in them. In these cases, our blue card theory holds up quite well: Encouraging, optimistic, nurturing communication and treatment fosters learning and behavioral successes. However, our orange card theory takes a bit of an intellectual beating here. It appears that some students are taking orange cards and, instead of being destructive, are blowing blue life into them by using the orange card for motivation. Researchers have noted this phenomenon and have labeled these individuals as resilient personalities. A resilient person simply takes orange and turns it blue. But how?

Again, the blue card theory provides a clue. When interviewing resilient students, researchers do find one common element: All resilient students mention the anchoring effect of at least one person "who cares." Frequently this is a parent or grandparent, sometimes a coach or teacher; less frequently it is a friend or sibling. Usually there is more than one caring individual providing an anchor for one aspect or another of the resilient student's life. That "caring person" is always to be found. It appears that "blue cards" in one's life do not just materialize internally as suggested by my earlier theory; they are systematically provided by others.

Creating New Labels

The phenomenon of positive effects seemingly originating from caustic events gives rise to a number of questions: What do we call an orange card that has the end effect of encouragement? And in the case of satiation (where students hear something so frequently they do not attend to it), are blue cards still blue and orange cards still or-

ange? Is a blue message an orange message when blue card kindness is directed toward the misbehaving student (who has been handing out lots of orange cards) and thereby evokes the justified, but still hurtful, feelings of guilt, remorse, or feelings of unworthiness? Are these blue cards now orange since they evoked shame and anguish?

I suppose we could have a bit of fun and add new labels. Orange cards that the students mutate into blue ones we could call "brown cards" because, when we mix orange and blue, we get brown. Blue and orange cards that are sent but not heard or are rejected out-of-hand we could call "white cards" since, like white noise in the background, we simply turn off our sensory perception of what we relegate to the background. We could have bright blue (enthusiastic) and dark blue (thoughtful); bright orange (overt) and dark orange (covert). We could even have rainbow messages; these would be the minimal encourages like, "I see, tell me more" that can be interpreted in many ways and the results reveal many of the thought processes of the speaker. With a bit of imagination, we could derive an entire color pallet of messages. However, there is a more reasonable way to enhance our understanding of messages and their impact.

The Rigors of Theory and Research

The more fruitful approach would be to study potential cause and effect paths of messages and outcomes in hope of developing explanatory structures we could use to predict outcomes for our various choices for action. What we are advocating is that we develop causal theories for communication within the helping professions.

That leads us to deal with two of the toughest activities in education: The development of explanatory theories and arguments of causality. These are sufficiently difficult that when I was first exposed to Invitational Education (IE), it was far more attractive simply to accept the strategies as personal values than to try to validate these beliefs. In short, "I like Invitational Education so I'm going to use it." Yet, as we shall see, that works for many of us in the short term, but is inadequate when we are attempting to convince others, or even more problematic, to institute policies or develop school culture.

These twists and turns of the blue card orange card analogy create a host of problems for us when we attempt to convince others of the merits of nurturing postures and the limitations of more competitive or hostile approaches based solely on personal value structures. First and inevitably, someone will say, "I had a teacher who was so mean to me, but I learned a lot from her." This negation strategy is based on an attempt to provide a single example that demonstrates that the value assertion is inadequate to explain what actually is happening. This attempt to discount a more gentle approach to life is predicated on a deterministic view of causality. That is, if I can find one case where hostility and caustic environments do not result in failure, then caustic treatment cannot be the cause of failure. Likewise, if I can find any examples of success where encouragement was absent, then encouragement is not the cause of success.

This logic is actually quite solid as long as we accept the deterministic paradigm that is the basis of Western science. As individuals who want to promote nurturing approaches to learning, we are faced with serious ques-

tions: How can we devise ways to answer our critics and provide explanations for the causes of success and failure in school that predict outcomes?

There are at least three ways to address the need to have stronger arguments for advocating inviting approaches. Most, however, lack the predictive validity that is the keystone of a causal argument. Each of the three has its own merits, and each has certain costs to us as advocates of IE. Let us examine each in turn.

Establishing Core Values

One way of responding to critics is to present inviting approaches to learning as a core value. A core value is not just a personal value, but a value so basic that society embraces it as part of the social fabric. Within a democratic society, we have core values of self-determination, freedom of expression, and liberty. Extending these core values to students creates an environment where they are free to search for happiness in many ways and by their personal choices.

An inviting approach honors this liberty and individual pursuit of fulfillment. However, this support of individual determination will cause us to face problematic issues that are sufficient roadblocks that core values alone will not guide the inviting educator. An example might be a student who refuses to complete homework assignments in math, but when examinations are given, the mischievous fellow miraculously obtains perfect scores. This student has found a personal alternative to fulfilling the learning goal. Since this mirrors the efficiency theory of a free market economy (he who gets more with less therefore has an advantage in the marketplace) we have to respect his actions

in support of our democratic ideals. This is problematic for some. What about the students who do not achieve well? Do they get to pick and choose what assignments they will do? Do these students have the right to fail if that is their choice? The realistic answer to both questions is a resounding "yes," but that type of thinking tends to tilt the whole educational enterprise on its edge. Certainly, it does not win many converts.

Other problems exist when using core values. Freedom of speech implies freedom of thought. Liberty provides for individual determination of life's goals. Regardless of society's goals for a student, the student can always reserve the right to reject those goals and pursue personally relevant goals (within broad social constraints.) As a result, unless there is danger or interference with the rights of others, teachers cannot compel or coerce students to accept education's goals for them; they can only persuade. At some time, all students cancel society's goals and insert their own during their educational careers. We expect this as the budding independence of the student mirrors the maturation process required for productive citizenship. However, it is difficult for us to accept the idea that students *have the right* to make choices that may not be in their best interests. To whit, it's not a very convincing argument and is easily countered by a number of other arguments, each based on competing values. While the attraction of appealing to core values is valid, it is insufficient.

Jurisprudential Evaluation and Upside and Downside Analyses

Another approach is to attempt to provide a preponderance of evidence to show the validity of IE in various conditions and outcomes and then allow the individual to de-

termine the appropriate inferences that can be made. This is often referred to as jurisprudential evaluation since it functions much like a courtroom by establishing evidence and presenting both positive and negative cases to a jury. The "upside and downside" is simply the positive and negative cases; that is, the best and the worst that can happen is predicted by following the tenet under examination. In this process we collect all relevant information regarding our theory; in this case we might postulate that nurturing comments precipitate successes and caustic comments facilitate failure. We then look at all types of information, both supportive and unsupportive, that illuminate our understanding. *JITP* has followed this approach since its inception.

With data carefully established, we could just leave the conclusion to the individual hoping that the weight of evidence will convince others to agree with us. In many ways, regardless of the techniques used, this is actually what happens. There are people who still believe the moon landings were fakes and Elvis is still alive. Some, regardless of the quality and substance of evidence, will believe what they want.

In addition to vagaries of individual decision making, establishing our advocacy argument on jurisprudential evaluation does not provide us with the explanatory structures that guide skillful use of IE constructs. We have lots of evidence that both timing and context has a major effect on the outcomes of any helping actions directed toward students. Without an understanding of these interaction effects, we may have an effective tool for learning, but lack substantive knowledge on how to use it. We risk promoting the attitude of Dr. Pangloss from Voltaire's

Candide. Once Pangloss took a positive position, it was positive forever.

Whether appropriate or not, the same attitude is directed at each and every problem. This Pollyanna approach does not have the strength or depth to handle life's tragedies, the death of a parent or loss of a job, nor the day-to-day wear-and-tear on our psyches, as well as maneuvering through life's obstacles. On my own part, some days just are not as good as others. Even when things are very good for me, I know great suffering exists for others. What we need is a theory that has evidence sufficient for probable causation.

Probabilistic Causation

It is in the area of probabilistic causation that our evidentiary case for IE must be made. It is, of course, the most difficult to understand and the most difficult to develop. When I demonstrated the connection between orange messages and positive outcomes, I made a point to emphasize that the orange messages were not the only messages being sent. Students who find themselves in the situation of using caustic comments to improve readily recount the many messages they were sending to *themselves* and these were ones of self-affirmation: "I *can* do it. I'll show you!" Thus the blue message is present even when the orange message is vocal. That left us considering whether caustic messages are good if they promote success in these limited circumstances.

More importantly, we do not have a particularly strong case to explain *why* caustic messages that are so devastating to some are employed by others who receive them to create positive experiences. We cannot address these complex issues until we abandon sim-

plistic notions of determinism that lead us to conclude, "Nurturing messages are good; caustic messages are bad." We must delve deeper into actual events that lead us to address a host of variables other than the messages themselves involved in communication.

This strategy has us looking for and identifying "interaction effects." It can be helpful to think of interaction affects as special conditions. A short circuit can, but does not necessarily, cause an injury. Smoking can, but does not necessarily, cause cancer. Playing in the street can, but does not necessarily result in being struck by a moving car. Yet, we cannot discount that short circuits, smoking, and playing in the street are risky behaviors that can result in injury or death. Nor can we argue that if you use a tool with a short circuit, smoke, or play in the street, you *will be* injured. We do know that these behaviors increase the risks, but alone are insufficient to cause the negative outcomes. At least they are insufficient without intervening variables that interact with our already risky conditions. The short circuit must be closed in such a way as to pass the electricity through the individual to ground. The smoking must interact with the physiology and genetic structure of the individual to cause disease. A moving car must be traveling with sufficient speed, with a distracted driver for the accident to occur.

Probabilistic causation appears to be common sense, quite conventional, and without controversy. However, our behavior frequently abandons probabilistic causation in favor of determinism. Reflect on how we actually deal with risky behaviors and how we embrace deterministic causality: "If you don't get an education, you'll have a bad job." "If you smoke marijuana you'll become a drug addict." "If you have unpro-

tected sex, you'll catch a disease." "If you say something mean, someone will be hurt." Students easily see through our risk analysis and discount our concern. Just as our reluctant convert argues that caustic messages can inspire students, students will remind you that as a teacher your college degree earns you less than bus drivers earn. They may retort with the established fact that a President smoked marijuana and did not become a drug addict. Or, that two people who only have sex with each other expose themselves only to a minuscule probability of contracting an STD.

We must ask ourselves, "Do nurturing messages cause those who receive them to find the energy to conduct themselves in ways that are productive for themselves and others?" Our answer, of course, is, "It depends." We are now asking questions of probabilistic causation.

Academic objectivity requires that when we explore a phenomenon, we set up our analysis so that any attempt to prove a theory is an equal attempt to disprove it. When we examine premises of IE, we have to look not just for the evidence that justifies or validates the premise, but also any data that may refute it. Our task then is to make sense of all the data that guides our practice and the arguments sufficient to gain supporters, to do this systematically, and to develop constructs sufficiently complex to provide evidence of predictive validity.

There are a number of ways to handle this problem and to gain support for the premises made in IE. None are simple and none are direct. Our best chance in the next decade for building the case for IE is in developing comprehensive explanatory structures that lead to predictive validity. That is, we de-

velop and test specific theories that provide us with advanced knowledge about the outcomes.

We could, for example, measure variables in a school and then predict learning outcomes based on IE variables such as the ratio of nurturing messages to caustic messages. Another is to measure many variables of a school, then work to change the communication and behavior patterns to correspond with the IE philosophy and measure the differences in outcomes from the pre and post assessments. Yet another is to compare two groups of schools where one highlights characteristics that are in alignment with IE and the other is matched for similar characteristics but lack a commitment to IE theory. There are other ways, of course, but one can clearly see the complexity and difficulty involved. Researchers speak of "time, money, and pain" when setting up research studies. Making the case for IE will involve copious amount of all three. This is the price that has to be paid to move beyond slogan and value statements.

Some Who Pay the Price

This volume of *JITP*, like those in the past, is built by those individuals who gladly give the time, money, and pain needed to develop the case for IE. The first article is a family affair. In the article *Cross-Cultural Instruction, Consciousness Raising, and Inviting Heightened Self-Esteem*, Ivers, Ivers, and Ivers explore the gap between who we are and the culturally influenced "ought-to-be" self. Postulating that the differential has the potential to lead to a negative self-image, the Ivers' clan argues that schooling can assist students in understanding the role of their culture in determining who they are and how they see themselves. By having skills to

analyze not only the self and the skills to analyze the degree of validity the cultural norms have, this chasm can be ameliorated, assisting the student toward a more robust and wholesome experience.

In our second piece, *Coloring in the Emotional Language of Place,* Martin Haigh examines how emotional states are affected by the characteristics of place, one of the five P's in invitational theory. Using Samkhya perspective (Samkhya is one of the six schools of classical Hindu philosophy), Haigh describes how learners are asked to reflect on their environment and how it relates to their current modes of thinking.

The third article, *Easing Transitions of Military Dependents into Hawaii Public Schools: An Invitational Education Link*, describes the plight of military families experiencing frequent and disruptive moves around the world and how the culture of the new destination affects family structure. Using Hawaii as a base of analysis, Kathleen Berg describes inviting programs designed to identify the needs frequent relocations create and how they can be ameliorated.

A Final Note

This is my ninth year as editor of *JITP*. It has been a rewarding and satisfying experience. Through the *JITP*, I have met people all over the world and the *JITP* has published articles from all the inhabited continents except South America. Recently, I was discussing Invitational Education with a school in Belem, Brazil so the possibility of a complete world sweep is in the making. That is a challenge I'll leave to the next editor. It is time for me to step aside and for a new voice to tackle the task of building the probabilistic causal case for invitational

education. As I write, we are looking for the next editor. I would love to introduce him or her to you in this final editorial, but life does not march to the deadlines our print presses. However, I promise to put on my detective hat and provide you with a complete run-down on all the amazing qualities of your new editor. And with that, I will say farewell and hope you will appreciate, as I do the fine work of the authors of this and past editions of *JITP*.

Phil Riner
Editor