

# Why “Writing Qualitative Inquiry” Matters A Factional Fable

Sir Harold L. Goodall, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, in a time not so long ago, and in an emerging field that has become where some of us here work today, there lived a beautiful idea whose name was Communication.<sup>2</sup>

The idea was beautiful because everyone appreciated it but no one really understood it, which, of course, is the case with all sorts of beauty in the world and all sorts of ideas about the world as well.

As a result of being beautiful, complex, and entirely misunderstood, the intriguing idea of Communication inspired generations of scholars to vie for control of its meaning. Which is to say to engage in sometimes extended, somewhat tedious, and always inconclusive verbal battles over how to best obtain “truth” regarding her beauty, as well as to create status hierarchies based on fairly arbitrary determinations of the worth or value of ways of expressing their appreciation and understanding of her. Which is to say, also and more to my point, to determine the one preferred style of storytelling, of writing about her, for writing—in addition to teaching—is what scholars do.

The earliest known studies were oral histories and epic poems, which beget comedies and tragic dramas, which beget longer personal narratives and letters and memoirs.<sup>3</sup> These studies, these written inquiries, were evaluated in relation to each other, as well as to all that came before them. The best of them, the stories that survive and are with us still, have stood time’s test, survived wars and famine, and inspired generations. They are rightly called “classic.”

They were the first exemplars of what today we call writing that exhibits in form and in style the term “qualitative inquiry.”<sup>4</sup> They were stories, performances, and poetry based on human problems, on life’s mysteries, and on speculative biological, cultural, political, and philosophical questions *that mattered*.



Then a series of strange events occurred. First, the academic field of Speech emerged in 1914 when 17 men, all teachers of public speaking, divorced teachers of writing and literature for reasons that, while available in the historical archives, are still not entirely convincing (Cohen, 1994). After all, these women and men revered the

same texts, taught the same literature and wrote articles on mostly the same rhetorical and dramatic subjects.

But teachers of speech felt devalued by their literary brethren. And they earned less money. It was argued, by organizing themselves into a professional society, by publishing their own journal, by developing their own theories and methods, and by writing scholarly essays and (eventually) scientific studies instead of “merely” telling stories, reading aloud poems, and performing plays, scholars of speech and rhetoric would overcome their humble birth. They would command respect. And likely get paid better.

Then the second strange thing occurred. Those scholars who had gone over to Speech feared that unless this new field became more scientific, we would fail to fully “measure up” to our scholarly brethren. There was, apparently, a keen need to keep up with our fellow psychos, socios, anthros, and the rest. Which would mean, eventually, that whatever original thinking and writing had gone into the early promise of our own theories and methods, our own unique identity, quickly was replaced by a need to so closely resemble the theories and methods and identities of our brethren that often it was impossible to distinguish ours from theirs. Nor did our brethren much like it.

Viewed one way, our attempt to “fit in” and “measure up” were simply an adolescent discipline’s urgent cry for attention.

Viewed another way, all this disciplinary status posturing and exclusionary rhetoric was the work of white male hegemony. But I’ll not dwell on disparaging remarks, however apt they may be.

So it was that the battle to rule the Communication storytelling domain, began. And so it is that I can now claim to reveal a secret history of that late 20th century battle, an heroic tale, eventually, that features the ascent of personal narrative and performance, and of reestablishing a place, and re-inventing the scope of older forms of qualitative inquiry, against all odds.



Where to begin? Probably this theme of battle can be traced to the early 1970s. There were then certain scholarly wizards who believed Communication to be something they identified as a “process.” Thus the “communication is a process” cult began and its cant



took hold, particularly among textbook authors.

A "process" is another beautiful idea (although it must be admitted that it is a pretty cheesy word) whose Velveeta allure is semiotically aligned with its spectacular rhetorical referents: infinity and ineffability. This is because those who claim "Communication is a process" always define it as a never-ending exchange whose unutterable meanings transcend what actually transpired. For writing, this means rather bad dialogue, lots of set-up with very few payoffs and in no way a sense of closure.

For those of you who may locate this conjurer's idea of process right up there with the narratively strange, it is wise to remember that it grew out of a culture, and a time, when young academic theorists smoked a lot of Columbian dope.



Also during this time there were those sorcerers who believed the idea of Communication, its truth and its beauty, was to be understood as a perfectible calculus of "verbal and nonverbal behavior."

Behavior could be observed and measured. Voila! Tables with numbers, charts with variables, and new words such as "multiple regression analysis" entered our common vocabulary. This turn in our discursive practices so reshaped the dominant scholarly narrative that at times it seemed as if the beautiful idea of Communication was corseted and bound to a fashionably narrow standard for measuring her beauty, a standard for communicative behavior that, when pulled tight, denied "significance," and therefore explanatory power, to ambiguity, variety, creativity, and robustness.

For those who may locate this idea of "significance" right alongside "process" among the rhetorically strange, it is wise to remember that this dark magical spell grew out of a culture, and of a time, when leading social scientists chain-smoked Marlboros, wore bad clothing, practiced unprotected sex with as many partners as possible, and voluntarily listened to disco.



The battle for the Kingdom was mostly a verbal exchange that occurred in journals and at conventions for the next 25 years or so. For awhile, those knights aligned with "process" and "measurement" were viewed as little more than novelties by their rhetorical and critical opposites.

But as their numbers increased, as their truth claims, models, and validity exercises gained explanatory power, their scientific norms for formulaic storytelling moved from the margins of our professional discourse to dominate its very center.

The very existence of stories, poems, and performances in the Communication field seemed destined to follow a path from diminished scholarly status to mere entertainment, and perhaps to banishment from the Kingdom entirely.

And so it was that Communication, the beautiful idea of it, the hope it held for a unique scholarly identity and for creative expression, fell away from the field except as a kind of ideational relic, little more than a old nameplate adorning any academic department too busy to think of something else cooler to call itself.

So it wasn't long until the actual memory of it, of the once beautiful idea of Communication, of its role in the classic literature, had disappeared almost entirely into myth (Macke, 1991).



Our story doesn't end here, although it might have.

Instead I believe it *begins* here.

And it begins with a personal narrative rediscovery among us fellow word sorcerers of what the idea of Communication did and *does* for people in the world.

Communication is what we use to address the human problems, life's mysteries, and important political and philosophical issues.

Communication, the creative and transformative possibility of it, offers not just answers to questions, but moreover *hope* against injustice, pain, suffering, silence, and loneliness.

Communication *enlivens* our imaginations, with which we envision a better world.

It *brings disparate others together* through stories, through conversations, through the singular power of language to get us to identify closely with each other, and through that identification to explore our common humanity, and through *that* exploration to embrace fully the larger questions, the deeper mysteries this life offers us out here among the stars.

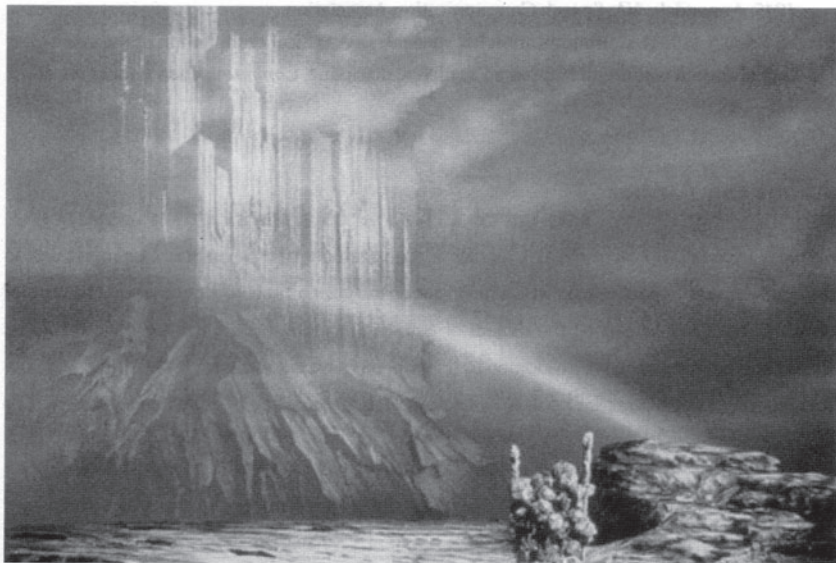


Communication changes the world.

Communication—the beautiful idea of it in stories and performances—teaches us the value of speaking and listening to each other for the purpose of learning how to live. It teaches us the value of telling the whole truth about our experiences, no matter how messy or funny or stupid or painful, and to be open to the whole truths spoken by others, no matter how different or disturbing or darkly delicious they may be. It also teaches us to own what we say, to put ourselves into our speech and into our stories, to become accountable as one human being to another for shaping a meaningful life.

I am, of course, only retelling what you already know. But I hope I am also reminding you of how close we came to losing this battle. Were it not for the persistence and vision of a few brave souls—Sir Norman, Lady Carolyn, Sir Arthur, Lady Laurel, Sir Ron and others—"writing qualitative inquiry" would have been lost cause, and the beautiful idea of Communication but a memory. There would be far fewer outlets for our published work, no international Congress, no credible way to reassert the centrality of stories and performances as scholarship that makes a difference in people's lives and that, God willing, reaches a broader public audience.

So it has come to pass that our work as scholars, right here in the Kingdom, is to practice the ancient faith in order to breathe new life back into our collective myth and reassume our rightful place in this epic story. Our faith in the power of story is borne of sacred knowledge and classic texts that the work of speech in this world is to call a better world into being. That is our place in the epic human story.



That is why "writing qualitative inquiry," no matter how strange the locution of those three words might be, matters.

## Notes

1. This performance of self as a "Tenured Knight" is based on a previous talk given at the Southern States Communication Association in April 2002. That presentation of self was dedicated to answering the question "Why Autoethnography Matters," so modifying it for our session seemed entirely appropriate. Thanks to Derek Cunningham for his work tracking down "free use" images.
2. Actually, this beautiful idea's original name was "speech." The name change to "Communication" didn't occur until the 20th century.
3. For a quick international account of these works, please see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_literature)
4. Admittedly a strange locution shared by certain academics. "Writing" and "inquiry" are almost synonyms—to write is to come to know, which is what we intend to happen when we inquire as well. But "qualitative" is problematic, at least for me. It smacks of the "two cultures" divide, the quantitative versus the qualitative/scientific versus artistic/humanistic that was so much a part of the battle described herein. So I shall not defend it. Better to move forward. Perhaps some other, better term will emerge.

## References

- Cohen, H. (1994). *The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline, 1914–1945*. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.
- Macke, Frank J. (1991). Communication left speechless: A critical examination of the evolution of speech communication as an academic discipline. *Communication Education, 40*, 125–143.

## About the Author

Harold L. Goodall, Jr. (Sir Harold L. Goodall, Jr. for this article), is Professor of Communication in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. He is the author of many books and articles on the subject of auto-ethnography, ethnography, American culture, and writing qualitative inquiry in addition to his work on the Cold War, counter-terrorism and public diplomacy. His most recent book is *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life* (Left Coast Press, 2008).