

Communication Techniques for Blended Learning:

Barack Obama and Julia Gillard, 2010-2013©

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Generating Trustworthy Messages and Engaging Audiences

Instructors of blended learning can benefit from political leaders' use of online media to portray the semblance of close, direct relations with their audiences. Leaders need to use the media to create a sense of community by generating messages of trust and developing relations with audiences based on empathy and inclusiveness (Castells, 2007, 2008; Fletcher, 2004). Similarly, instructors need to foster a sense of community in blended learning classrooms based on trust and belonging (Lord & Lomicka, 2008; Savery, 2005).

This paper will use examples from the close alliance between US President Barack Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard from 2010 to 2013 to show the possibilities of using online media to generate images of trust. Obama and Gillard persuaded journalists to represent them as more inclusive leaders, who communicated closely with public audiences during their meetings in Australia. Their media techniques influenced journalists to convey a sense of citizen participation in their goal of fighting international terrorism, and they won public support for their strengthened alliance (Australian Government, 2010-12; Australian Labor, 2010-12; Gillard, 2012; Heanu, 2011; Lowy Institute, 2012; Obama, 2011a, 2011b; *President Obama's News Conference ... 2011*; *President Obama ... 2011*; The White House, 2011a, 2011b).

Since the ancient Greek scholars, educators have developed rhetoric in the art of persuading learners to expand their knowledge (Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. 1996; Demosthenes, *Speeches*, trans. 1930; Lysias, *Selected Speeches*, trans. 2002). In practice, the scholars of educational rhetoric had often narrowed their focus to those who had access to civic authority and a public forum. This practice had frequently limited research to dominant rhetorical forms of

authoritarian control and power (Stephens, 2003). In contrast, President Obama and Prime Minister Gillard rehearsed and practiced more inclusive rhetoric to create media impressions that they involved audiences as close allies in their leadership goals to fight terrorism (e.g. *President Obama's News Conference ... 2011*; The White House, 2011a). Teachers in blended learning can adapt these leaders' media techniques to create the sense of a blended learning community that can encourage active learning and reflective thinking skills (Gruber, 2012).

President Obama's visit to Australia in 2011 shows the possibilities of using online media to develop citizens' informed, active participation in a sense of community. Before Obama's Australian campaign, for example, Gillard had promoted to journalists that she had repeatedly emailed a 12-year-old child, Chelsea Gallagher, who had asked the prime minister to meet the president. The scene had been stage-managed for journalists to report on a seemingly spontaneous greeting. Reporters cooperated to portray Obama's apparently impromptu, informal greeting to the child as signifying his commitment to Australian education (Rosenberg, 2011). The president's two-day tour of the country generated astonishingly high levels of enthusiasm from many Australians, who had become increasingly cynical about the prolonged commitments in the international war against terrorism (Lowy Institute, 2012). In Australia, Obama allowed unprecedented access for the local journalists to follow, tweet and report on his campaign to win support for strengthening the US role as a major Pacific power (Waters, 2011). He generated the reporters' support for sending more US marines, some 2500 troops, to Australia's military base in the city of Darwin (Coorey, 2011a; Kissel, 2011; Leslie, 2011; Ramzy, 2011). One national radio broadcaster, for example, commented that the president received the blanket media coverage in Australia that most world leaders dreamt of (Heanu, 2011).

Likewise, as the Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard worked hard to persuade multimedia journalists to generate images of trust in her alliance with Obama. As Obama developed more inclusive and interactive news briefings, Gillard had increased the number of prime ministers' media conferences (Australian Government, 1996-2013; Graber & Dunaway, 2014). She had invited online camera operators and technicians to her news meetings to develop her use of these multimedia techniques for communicating with public audiences (Oakes, 2013; Waterford, 2013). The communication strategies helped the president and prime minister to win public support for a strengthened alliance. Also public opinion polling indicated that people understood the two leaders' alliance goal (Hartcher, 2012; Lowy Institute, 2012). In particular, online commentators remarked on the lack of media attention to the relatively few images of dissent during the alliance meetings; this differed from the highly publicized protests that had accompanied the previous wartime visits of past US presidents (ABC Lateline, 2003; Coorey, 2011b; Palm, 2011; Sydney Morning Herald, 2003; Wall Street Journal, 2011).

Obama and Gillard developed multimedia techniques, including more inclusive rhetoric, visual gestures, and seemingly interactive images (e.g. Gillard, 2011a; The White House, 2011a). These techniques helped to persuade journalists to focus on their alliance meetings and enhance citizens' understanding of their goal (ABC News, 2011a; Coorey & Welch, 2011; Rosenberg, 2011). The online, non-hierarchical structure already contains the elements that allow for more appearances of egalitarian, interactive exchanges between users and audiences. Online news structures, promoting the journalism elements of interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimodality, can generate images of trust and an egalitarian sense of connectedness with audiences (Deuze, 2003; Oravec, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Teachers can use these

multimedia techniques for expanding the language of inclusivity, encouraging active and engaged blended learning communities with participants as equals (Gruber, 2012).

Performing Visual Rhetoric

Obama and Gillard developed visual rhetoric and media performances to establish a sense of civic identity based on shared democratic values of fighting terrorism. For example, they addressed “cheering, foot-stomping” American marines and Australian soldiers during a videocast speech in the city of Darwin on November 17, 2011 (Gillard, 2014, p. 160). Both leaders referred to iconic images of the alliance in World War II, when Americans and Australians had countered Axis attacks that had included the bombing of Darwin in 1942. Although Obama and Gillard appeared to speak spontaneously, they delivered rehearsed, memorized performances in the sultry Darwin weather (The White House, 2011a). A secret service agent had fainted because the air-conditioner had failed, but Obama only indicated a problem by wiping his brow (Gillard, 2014; Waters, 2011). He assured the public audiences that he would not give a formal speech because he planned to meet the troops, generating cheering from the public gallery back rows.

Obama and Gillard used inclusive gestures and language to convey a sense of honest, direct relations with news audiences. For example, Gillard repeatedly raised her hands, with her palms upturned, as she told the group that the president “wanted to get out and about and meet some real Aussies,” veering from the more formal term, Australians, in the script (Gillard, 2011b; The White House, 2011a). The open gesturing indicated a sense of connectedness with audiences watching the videocast speech. The visual rhetoric and seemingly interactive communication persuaded journalists to portray the leaders as involving news audiences in the

alliance (Coorey, 2011a; Kissel, 2011; Leslie, 2011; Ramzy, 2011). The media representations of this speech provide insights for educators in using informal language, visual signs, and inclusive gestures to create a sense of civic engagement in blended learning goals (Franklin, 2011).

Gillard's alliance campaign in America, March 2011

Some months before Obama's Australian visit, Julia Gillard had won American journalists' support for promoting her goal of strengthening the alliance, nuanced by rhetorical performances to evoke shared cultural values. She developed more inclusive, personal, and informal rhetoric than her Australian prime ministerial predecessors' oratory when addressing the US Congress on March 9, 2011 (2011a; Hawke, 1988; Howard, 2002; Menzies, 1950). Although she had memorized her thirty-minute videocast speech, she added the words, "I say to each of you", and emphasized "friends" more times than this term appeared in her script to create the semblance of a direct relationship with online audiences (2011a, 2011c). Her opening remark to "ladies and gentlemen" included her emphasis of female roles (2011a). Previous prime ministers had used more masculine, distant language when speaking to the joint meeting of the US Congress (Hawke, 1988; Howard, 2002; Menzies, 1950). Rather than overt assertions of personal power, Gillard used symbolism to appeal to mass audiences' shared democratic values during her speech in the US Congress. She told an emotive story to evoke a collective memory of heroism in battling terrorism, a meticulously rehearsed anecdote, as she gestured to two firefighters seated in the public gallery front row. One of the firefighters, an Australian, had brought back a vintage American fireman's helmet in his possession that had been signed by his New York friend, Kevin Dowdell, who had been killed in the 9/11 attacks. Kevin's son, James Dowdell, was listening to Gillard's speech in the front row, and he held up his father's helmet to cheering Congress members. This anecdote helped Gillard to generate standing ovations and

applause for one-tenth of her speech (2011a, 2011c). In comparison, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had received applause for one-eighth of his newsreel address to Congress, when he declared the American entry to the Pacific war (1941).

After Gillard's speech, Washington correspondents reported on Americans' unusually exuberant reaction to an Australian prime minister, describing his as a "very warm speech" and remarking on the "excess of emotional hype" (ABC AM, 2011; Grattan, 2011). Even so, a *Los Angeles Times* blogger commented that Gillard spoke with a "heartfelt tone" and emotion "that could not be faked" (Malcolm, 2011). He referred to her bright red coat that helped her to appear "refreshing" and spontaneous: the vivid color also assisted in promoting audience engagement and online interactivity (Malcolm, 2011; Landa, 2011). For example, the *Los Angeles Times* website (March 9, 2011) republished Gillard's entire speech, indicating media support for her leadership style in addressing news audiences as peers and using ordinary people's stories to convey a shared experience. Gillard's use of anecdotes provide some useful ideas for instructors, not to manipulate or distort stories, but to generate a sense of community in the blended learning group to motivate the participants to be successful (Alonso, López, Manrique & Viñes, 2005).

Signifying compassion

Just as political leaders and blended learning instructors share goals in creating a sense of informed, engaged communities, they face similar challenges in needing to deliver personalized, seemingly intimate messages about complex issues in online environments. During online classes, learners can share surprisingly personal details in one-to-one messages with the instructors that they usually keep concealed in traditionally large classrooms. It is often

necessary for instructors to use language that seemingly reduces the distance between them and their students to indicate a compassionate approach (Savery, 2005).

When Obama and Gillard met in Australia in 2011, they expanded the use of online media, developing compassionate language to indicate a lack of separation between them and public audiences. As Gillard became the first prime minister to videocast condolence message on Youtube and Facebook, she used visual symbolism and rhetoric to create the sense of a close connection with news audiences (2011d, 2011e, 2011f, 2011g). Online journalists circulated her messages that “the nation stands with them,” the families of soldiers killed in Afghanistan (2011g; Thompson, 2011). Also she chose words to indicate a close link with public audiences as she told journalists, “our loving thoughts are with them,” and “our hearts go out to a (soldier’s) wife ... our hearts go out to his family and friends” (2011d). This intense focus on individual fallen soldiers and their families contrasted with previous prime ministerial communications that used more distant imagery and impersonal language (Howard, 2005, 2007; Rudd, 2008, 2009). Furthermore, Obama suggested an emotional bond with public audiences as he talked about the Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan. During his Australian visit, he directly addressed the families of the killed soldiers in a videocast speech by commenting: “And to their families, I say – no words are sufficient for the depth of your sacrifice.” He added: “But we will honor your loved ones by completing their mission, by making sure Afghanistan is never again used to attack our people. And I am confident that we are going to succeed” (The White House, 2011a). The two leaders rarely referred to speech notes during these tributes and persuaded journalists to show them as reassuring by focusing on close-up images of their faces (e.g., Ten News Queensland, 2011; *The Australian*, 2011). This was an untraditional image of political power and suggested a more intimate outlook (Apkon, 2013).

Obama and Gillard retained journalists' endorsement for their alliance leaderships when they released unprecedented details about the soldiers' deaths and linked these to a meaningful purpose of national security. At these times, the journalists presented them as comforting leaders with popular support and closely connected with public audiences (ABC News, 2011b; Coorey & Oakes, 2011; Ellery, 2011; Hall, 2011; Ten News Queensland, 2011; *The Australian*, 2011). These communication tactics can also be effective for blended learning instructors, who can use compassionate language to show they are willing to resolve conflicts and encourage learners to share in a supportive environment.

Inspiring hope for the future

Moreover, Obama won media support for his Australian speeches because he set clear goals to be achieved for a promising future (Lowy Institute, 2012). He repeatedly affirmed the alliance's purpose in defeating terrorism during his address to the Australian Parliament on November 17, 2011. Also he set a clear time frame for bringing home the troops from Afghanistan, emphasizing hope for the future. The president selected targeted messages to appeal to Australian journalists when he emphasized his keywords of a shared future and prosperity (2011b). During Obama's Australian news conference, for example, he referred to his childhood experiences in that country as an eight-year-old boy to create a bond with audiences. Throughout his Australian trip, Obama persuaded local journalists to support him by using the local idiom (Waters, 2011). He also laughed about his attempts to use the Australian accent after dinner at Parliament House, Canberra; multimedia journalists represented his jokes favorably (ABC News, 2011c, 2011d; Farnsworth, 2011; The White House, 2011c). Furthermore, Gillard had persuaded journalists to portray her broad accent as indicating she was an ordinary Australian, even though she was the country's first female prime minister (Kamanev, 2010). Similarly, she had gained

journalists' cooperation to support her leadership, when she opened the first parliamentary debate on the war in Afghanistan (ABC Lateline, 2010). Responding to public opinion, she announced that Australia would withdraw the troops from Afghanistan in 2013, a year earlier than expected (2012).

The president and prime minister delivered their alliance messages clearly and their speeches were close to readability standards for comprehensible information to public audiences (Day, 2008; Gillard, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e, 2011f, 2011g; Lim 2003; Obama, 2011a, 2011c; The White House, 2011a, 2011b). Polls indicated that most Australians had responded positively to Obama's media message on the alliance's meaning and purpose, with an upsurge in popular support for strengthening relations with America (Hartcher, 2012; Lowy Institute, 2012). The success of Obama's Australian campaign indicates the benefits for blended learning instructors to deliver meaningful content, linked to a clear purpose and achievable goals.

Conclusion: Interacting with Communities of Learners

These rarely researched multimedia tactics of Obama and Gillard provide useful communication techniques in expanding blended learning classrooms. Both leaders and educators need to create engaged, active communities by generating trust in their management. Creating trust in a leader has been a decisive form of power in democracies to unify active communities. During their alliance, Obama and Gillard persuaded journalists to portray them as closing communicating with public audiences based on empathy and inclusiveness. The online structure already contained elements that suited these leaders in generating images of communicating with audiences as equals. The two leaders' successful communication tactics

indicate the possibilities for blended learning educators to expand the language of inclusivity to involve more learners. These tactics include telling stories to develop a web of connectedness and a unified sense of identity based on shared values. Moreover, these techniques show the value of delivering clear messages linked to a meaningful purpose and achievable goals to enhance audiences' understanding. Although Obama and Gillard had rehearsed staged messages, they elicited journalists' cooperation to present their media interactions as spontaneous, informal, and personalized. An analysis of these communication techniques indicates blended learning instructors can increasingly engage with their audiences in ways that identify with student vulnerabilities as well as strengths to elicit a capacity for new ideas and hope for creative possibilities.

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