

Palaima: Talk loud and say something

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Recently I heard Karen Artzt, Ashbel Smith Professor Emeritus of Molecular Genetics and Microbiology at the University of Texas at Austin, give a talk about some of her life's work. She explained the process of searching for coding sequences in mammalian genomes and how the results help prevent physical defects from developing in young children.

Artzt was asked what new discoveries lie ahead. She took time to think and then said, "Progress in this field of research is saltatory." She traced in the air with her index finger a research timeline marked by sudden steps upward.

In that moment, Artzt's thoughtful command of language matched her mastery of science. Even those of us who abide by George Orwell's rule to use plain English words whenever possible knew that the Latin-derived word saltatory — proceeding by leaps rather than gradually — was perfect.

Later, I wondered why Artzt's reply struck us as so special. I think I now know why, and it is no trivial matter.

We are used to listening to what George Saunders calls "braindead megaphones," presenters of information who, as the late godfather of soul and plain-speaker of many social and political truths, James Brown put it, practice the art of "Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing."

Artzt gave a direct answer. She did not pretend to know what she could not know. She did not preen as an expert in the spotlight. She told us the truth.

The truth is what James Brown learned growing up in the soul-destroying Jim Crow poverty of Barnwell, S.C. and Augusta, Ga. In his autobiography, Brown said that “Talkin’ Loud and Sayin’ Nothing” was “aimed at the politicians who were running their mouths but had no knowledge of what life was like for a lot of people.”

Instead of straight talk and meaningful discussion, we get in the media and from our political, cultural and institutional leaders what Saunders calls “dopey communication.” Leaders have agenda to push and push fast. They short-circuit discussion and truly democratic deliberation. They speak to wide audiences who have little time to think over what is said and no opportunity to pose questions or counter arguments. Their language is vague, unclear, filled with jargon phrases and assertions unsupported by facts.

For example, UT Austin and the UT System have been mobilizing quickly to be major players in producing massive open online courses that can be taken electronically by tens of thousands of students worldwide. UT President Bill Powers made a public statement in February, “Our faculty is enthusiastic about this frontier.”

This sounds good. But it is an assertion without proof. It requires that Powers knew that a solid majority of faculty members last February were very keen on the massive online course offerings. But he could not know that without a well-constructed anonymous survey taken after meaningful discussions with the general faculty in the many schools and programs across campus about the many pros and equally many cons of using mass online courses in higher education. It is savvier to claim faculty enthusiasm about a frontier. People used to braindead megaphones will believe it.

One reason to push ahead is that enthusiasts think there is lots of money to be made by developing and offering the online course

offerings. Raising revenues is good, but only if we do not cause serious collateral harm to education.

No matter. The Institute for Transformational Learning was authorized by the UT System in August 2011 and established in 2012 “to leapfrog our current efforts” at blended and online learning. In other words, we are leaping right over wise broad-based deliberation.

The institute’s executive director Steven Mintz told the faculty council in March that the use of online course offerings “is the golden goose, and I want to support that goose.” But no one knows whether online courses will be the money-generator that Mintz imagines or the very fairy tale to which Mintz refers.

“The Golden Goose” is tale 64 in the Brothers Grimm collection. In it, all who greedily and without forethought try to pluck golden feathers from the golden goose become stuck to it and to each other. In the end they are thoroughly discomfited.

On MOOCs and other matters our university leaders should think carefully and make haste slowly. They should invite thought from the united faculty of experienced scholar-educators whose work is largely responsible for our ranking 25th among world universities in the latest “Times Higher Education” survey. They surely should know how to tell a golden goose from a goose that will lay a golden egg or no egg at all.