Essentially Safe and Incredibly Closed: How Ontario’s rhetoric of schools individualized risk during the COVID-19 pandemic

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario, the concept of risk has been used to justify government decisions on restrictions, supplies, and medical treatments. It has affected workplaces, schools and activities of daily living. And it has been a key driver of our collective belief and participation in the pandemic effort. Yet over this same time period, the meaning of “risk” has been in flux; what was a risk in March 2020 had changed significantly by March 2021. While this fact reflects our on-going scientific learning about the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it also reflects the nature of risk.

Risk, according to sociologist Ulrich Beck, is an “anticipation of catastrophe” (1). In *World at Risk*, he posits that we live in a new kind of modern era, where risks result from the success of modern life (161). One example of this is how the rapid global spread of COVID-19 was due, at least in part, to the success of global travel systems.

Beck’s theory also explains that these types of risks, which are not perceptibly obvious, must be “staged” in the media to “become real” (Beck, 140) Staging is a media-driven form of rhetorical construction that can generate belief in imperceivable risk, and spur collective action in the public. Thus, the staging (and re-staging) of risk can guide members of the public in understanding what activities of daily living are safe and necessary, and which are not. Staging can also be used to individualize risks. This means leaving decisions for risk-mitigation to individuals, which is problematic when the risks are impossible for an individual to mitigate. (Beck, 62)

A rhetorical perspective is also key to understanding risk during the pandemic, as it was often staged through epideictic means: “declarations” and “orders” from the government are what Kenneth Burke would call “symbolic actions” that make material changes in reality. Furthermore, Burke’s analytical framework of *dramatism* is a way of pinning down Government-created staging to examine the concepts dominating their changing definitions of “the essential.”
The topic of Ontario Public schools as part of staging risk has been a key point of friction during the pandemic. In this paper, it serves as a case study to illustrate how the Ontario Government individualized the risks and tasks of COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Instead of guiding collective actions, government communication created contradictions that ultimately undermined the Ontario public’s sense of meaningful collective action.

**Dramatizing Risk**

Beck’s thesis of world risk society helps us chart the pandemic from this social perspective by articulating how risk must be “staged” when it cannot be physically perceived and that staging can create a sense of coming-together for a common purpose, or it can individualize by isolating and assigning risk-management to individuals who will “bear the cost” (63).

Beck refers to the staging of risk as a method of “dramatizing” risk (87). While he explains the social impact of staging, it doesn’t offer a practical tool for analysis of staging, and for this, we can turn to rhetoric. Kenneth Burke’s *dramatistic pentad* (Burke, “Container”) organizes analysis using the five basic elements of drama (act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose). It is a tool for studying the who, what, where, when, why and how of human symbolic action and interpreting the motives of rhetorical action through them. This fills a critical gap in the application of Beck’s theories by providing a method for examining how the effects of staging connect to the contents of staging. Comparing pentad terms in ratios reveals the dominant elements and relationships within a text, and allows us to interpret how rhetors and stagings are operating.

**Essentially Constructed**

The “making real” of the pandemic in Ontario began in earnest with the closure of public schools in March, 2020 (“Ontario”). The safety and necessity of schooling continued to be a focus of risk staging for the Government throughout the pandemic.

My analysis looks at three key points of staging the risk of COVID-19 and public schools in 2020, (1) Mid-March, when schools were closed for the first time and a state
of emergency was declared, (2) Late March, when the school closures were extended and the government launched a “Learn at Home” program, and (3) the plans for reopening of schools in September. I have examined the official statements, press releases and media kits from the Government of Ontario Newsroom website as primary sources (see Table 1, below). These are key periods to examine as they trace the rapid shift in the Government’s construction of “essential” from collective action, to individual task assignment.

Table 1 - Government of Ontario Newsroom documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staging Period</th>
<th>Press Release</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mid March 2020</td>
<td>Statement from Premier Ford, Minister Elliott, and Minister Lecce on the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)</td>
<td>12 March 2020</td>
<td>School Closure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ontario Enacts Declaration of Emergency to Protect the Public</td>
<td>17 March 2020</td>
<td>Declaration of emergency and more business and service closures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late March 2020</td>
<td>Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of their Own Home</td>
<td>20 March 2020</td>
<td>Announcement of “Learn at Home” portal website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ontario Extends School and Child Care Closures to Fight Spread of COVID-19</td>
<td>31 March 2020</td>
<td>Extension of school closures to May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reopening Plan</td>
<td>Ontario Releases Plan for Safe Reopening of Schools in September</td>
<td>30 July 2020</td>
<td>Announcement of plan for Back to School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis
Mid-March 2020

The mid-March period of government communication was dominated by scene and purpose driven messaging. Pentad analysis of press releases on 12 and 17 March reveals both of these as scene-dominant communications that largely focus on the “emerging public health issue” of COVID-10 and the government’s actions as a “response” to this context (12 March). In “Container and Thing Contained,” Burke writes about scene dominance this way: “there is implicit in the quality of a scene the quality of the action that is to take place within it. This would be another way of saying that the act will be consistent with the scene.” (p 62). Thus, we can interpret this rhetorical focus on scene as a contextual justification for the act. School closures are part of the “decisive action” that will “ensure the province’s health care system is positioned to be ready for any scenario.” (12 March).

Purpose is revealed in the opening statements about protecting “the health and well-being of Ontarians” (12 March) and the “health and safety of all individuals and families” (17 March). In staging the risk of COVID-19, the government positions the school closures, and the state of emergency, as both unavoidable (scenic dominance) and necessary (purpose dominance).

This form of staging is part of what Beck would call the “becoming” of a catastrophe, where staging helps to construct a “state of exception” (67-69). The focus on scene in this case helps to develop the “exception” as reality, and the emphasis on purpose justifies the actions and makes them feel unified and meaningful.

Yet, both of these mid-March texts contain contradictions that undermine the construction of both the state of exception and the necessity of the Government’s actions. As part of the emergency declaration, Premier Ford stressed it’s purpose: “We are taking this extraordinary measure because we must offer our full sport and every power possible to help our health care sector fight the spread of COVID-19.” (17 March) Yet, he also repeatedly declared that, “This does not constitute a provincial shutdown,” and “the vast majority of businesses can operate normally.” (17 March, video). These two statements make the Government’s purpose ambiguous, and destabilize the construction of their actions as “essential.”
Late-March

The second stage of communication, when school closures were extended to May and the Government introduced a “Learn at Home” website, demonstrates a strong focus on *agency*, and an implied *agent*.

Though the title states “Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of Their Own Home,” the body of the text clarifies that the Government will “provide resources,” “support families and students,” and be “arming parents with resources” (20 March). Their role is as an *agency* for learning, and the locus of responsibility for education is moved onto parents and students as the implied *agents*. The “Learn at Home” website contains a “suite of digital learning products designed to engage young minds in learning,” and “at-home activities,” that will “ensure continuity in education.” The *act* of “ensuring continuity in education” will be accomplished with the agency of the Learn at Home website by unspecified agents. The contradiction is blatant here - the website is a tool that will not “ensure” anything - and it can’t possibly be expected to do so.

By the 31 March press release on extending school closures, the unspecified agents who might be responsible for “ensuring” learning have been specified - they are the “education community” of parents, students, and teachers who have now been provided a “new set of expectations.” These “expectations” are another rhetorical move that sets the Government into the role of *agency* by separating Government from the “education community.” They are not part of the community as participating agents, but an agency that enables education-interested individuals. Within Beck’s framework of risk society, we can see this is an example of the risk of learning loss being *individualized* and assigned to parents and students, rather than creating a collective sense of meaningful action.

Reopening September 2020

In the announcement, “Ontario Releases Plan for Safe Reopening of Schools in September,” pentad analysis reveals a continued emphasis on *agency* as well as implied *agent*. Agency almost overwhelms the text; a 9-bullet point list itemizes the govern-
ment’s “$300 million in targeted, immediate, and evidence-informed investments” (30 July); and emphasizes Government’s role as an agency that “implements additional public health protocols,” and “supports implementation of these protocols.” (30 July)

The purpose seems to be that, “It’s been hard on families to balance work and child care, while kids have been separated from friends and other kids their own age.” (30 July). Purpose, here, does not provide a powerful rationale for school as “essential” to the province or society as a whole, rather it positions school as a service for individual families and children. One that offers, “[p]arents … the option to enroll their children in remote delivery, which respects their fundamental role in making the final determination of whether they feel safe with their children returning to School.” (30 July). The Government shifts the burden of risk to the individual parent, casting them as the “fundamental” agent of safety for their children while removing them from participation in a collective action of school safety. The government claims to have “made school safe,” but implicates individual parents, students and teachers in the role of agents of this safety, while simultaneously undermining their ability to work together.

**Conclusion**

Examining the Ontario Government’s announcements using pentad analysis and the Beck’s framework of world risk society, shows how the risk of COVID-19 as it related to schooling was individualized and assigned to implied agents of parents, students and teachers. This typified the Ontario Government’s approach to the pandemic in general, as an agency of ambiguous “support” for individuals managing personal risk of COVID-19 while also navigating the changing and often contradictory restriction laws. As the pandemic continued, this individualization gave rise to “covid-fatigue,” as people became exhausted by the daily risk calculus (risk of illness but also risk of breaking the laws). Perhaps it also fuelled the individualistic lockdown and mask-wearing protests (Van Rooy).

This approach stands in stark contrast to the treatment of public school in British Columbia, which constructed schools as a public good, a vital support for essential workers, and a critical support for children. In B.C., schools also closed “indefinitely” in March, at which time the Minister for Education asked parents and guardians to “speak
to their children about the reasons... ‘The actions we are taking today are temporary,’ he said. ‘We will return to regular school life down the road. In the meantime, look out for one another’” (Larsen). Schools were reopened to children of essential workers in May, and to all B.C. children on a part-time basis by June. B.C.’s rationale was “‘We want to make sure we can safely get kids back into classrooms. It’s not just about reading, writing and arithmetic [...] School is a place of joy for many people.’” (Hernandez and Kurjata) The collective nature of this construction meant that risks surrounding schooling were risks to the community, illustrating a marked difference in staging, compared to Ontario. As we continue to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic with an eye to “the next pandemic” (“Preparing”), perhaps we can learn how to turn messages of individual compliance into messages of “individual engagement in collective action” (Mehlenbacher) that can create more cohesive mitigation efforts.
Works Cited and Consulted


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Mehlenbacher, Ashley R. Module 5: Environmental Justice. English 492, University of Waterloo, Spring 2021, [LEARN Course Module], https://learn.uwaterloo.ca/d2l/le/content/676227/viewContent/3746305/View.


