Drowning in Possibility: Commonplace Metaphors and the Existing Pool of Knowledge Surrounding Aquatic Safety Education

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Are we making the same argument? Rhetors claim that when arguments center on the same term, but use different underlying meanings, adequate solutions cannot be reached. In essence, we cannot reach adequate solutions because we are actually making different arguments without coming to that realization. This rhetorical concept can also be applied to health education and to examining our understanding of what it means to be "safe" in an aquatic environment. This essay describes research gathered on the general public's conceptualizations of aquatic safety. By rhetorically destabilizing "aquatic safety" as a commonplace metaphor, the nuances of terms like "drowning," "prevention," and "safety" are acknowledged and presented to stabilize arguments surrounding the terms for the sake of creating new aquatic education policy.

Commonplaces in "Objective" Technical Communication

This essay will focus on the concept of commonplace, or the idea of a perceived consensus within a community, as a tool to examine rhetorically how aquatic safety is commonly defined and understood. The concept of commonplace, or *topoi*, is based upon the popular notion held by many ancient Western rhetoricians that [common]places exist as hidden spaces. When Quintilian refers to rhetorical commonplaces in *The Institutes of Oratory*, he speaks of them not only as the "secret places where arguments reside," but also as the loci "from which [such arguments] must be drawn"; they are places of invention (Crowley 50; Boyle 127). The same notion of secret locales of constructed argument is reiterated by Cicero when he writes, in a letter to Trebatius, that locating hidden things is easy when "the hiding place is pointed out and marked" (Crowley 50). Cicero, like Quintilian, stresses the importance of (re)discovering the hidden arguments, and suggests that "if we wish to track down some argument, we ought to know the places or topics"—we, as scholars, must actively look for and deconstruct the commonplaces in order to discover what arguments underly the subject(s) under investigation (Crowley 50).

This long-standing definition of commonplace / *topoi* may also be understood, if not slightly complicated, alongside more modern rhetorical theory: The idea that within general places of community consensuses exist specific lines of persuasion not readily

visible to a given audience, suggests that commonplace metaphors exist similar to what Kenneth Burke refers to as "terministic screens." As Burke states, terministic screens allow an audience to "comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another... necessarily hid[ing] other aspects of the [same] concept" (10). Because commonplace metaphors act in this way and disguise information through the idea of "false" illumination, they "screen" ideological points that exist unconsciously in our everyday understanding. Burke's screens become more important to this discussion of commonplace when we consider his observation that terministic screen can be manipulated for persuasive purposes by the rhetor in nearly unperceivable ways (10). Almost identically, commonplace metaphors are malleable tools that allow variation in personal understandings or in the individual's perception of what constitutes a term or issue. They are thus able to be used for persuasive purposes, and when observed by the technical rhetor, deconstructed for the purpose of negating claims of objective definition.

In this essay, I employ the concept of commonplace within the larger methodological approach used by scholars in the field of technical communication. Technical communication is a branch of rhetorical study that focuses on discussing specialized information that often appears in conversation with labels of neutrality (meaning it does not lean to one side or another) and objectivity (assuming an absolute, unbiased truth), one that places a significant focus on disrupting supposedly neutral and/or objective ideologies in a variety of cultural realms (Frost and Eble). Because such ideologies exist in everyday spoken language and in cultural symbols, many ideological values exist as entities that

we (as humans) are not consciously aware of. This project looks specifically at the ideologies of objectivity in aquatic safety education through the employment of a technical rhetoric lens (Crowley 53). I employ a technical rhetoric approach with special attention to the more specific concept of commonplaces because, as Cicero and Quintilian have established, commonplaces exist as hidden places from which *actual* underlying argument(s) may be pulled—these places, too, rely on ideological values that are hidden from human consciousness. Technical rhetoric serves an important role in presenting this type of information because the field's practice emphasizes destabilizing the concept of objectivity by showing how even seemingly objective (or *True*) subjects can be persuasive (motivated and subjective) in nature, while the notion of commonplace serves as a specific tool to further illuminate the existence of persuasive power within the expressed assumptions of common groups (Frost and Eble).

In observing "the complex, shifting, and ambiguous meanings of commonplace metaphors," we can note how these "may also destabilize naturalized meanings and values," or ideologies, that have been created over time (Spoel et al. 2). Additionally, because the essence of a metaphor "is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another," the commonplace metaphor must be understood not as "merely the words we use," but as "our very concept of an argument" (Spoel et al. 5). By dissecting how people use terms (especially those considered more mundane) as metaphors, one can destabilize the commonplaces in use.

This rhetorical basis is vital when observing how the general public quickly accepts most technical rhetorics on safety education as neutral policies due to the specialized language

being employed in both conscious and unconscious manners. Here, neutrality is implied because these rhetorics are based on a particular commonplace that remains constant within a dominant percentage of the topic's arguments—the general consensus being that everyone wants safety. However, assuming a simple commonplace, like the one above, often erases the nuances of meaning underlying the term *safety*. When examining safety through a rhetorical lens, one must grasp that it does not, as the common arguments of neutrality insist, exist with a single, fully objective definition. The issues of miscommunication of commonplace within this setting are vital to reaching an understanding of what it means to want, be educated about, and talk about safety. To research such miscommunications, this essay focuses on definitions in safety education, describing the ways in which the general public conceptualizes aquatic safety by examining underlying commonplace metaphors and the hidden assumptions they screen.

The Commonplace of Drowning

The assumption of neutrality that accompanies most safety rhetorics becomes particularly dangerous when one goes beyond theoretical importance and into the real-life repercussions of miscommunicating and falsely labeling specialized information, of selling objective, singular truths. As a competitive swimmer turned Red Cross and YUSA certified head lifeguard and swim instructor, someone trained to understand aquatic safety at the highest degrees, I find such rhetorical danger particularly palpable within the safety subfield of aquatic education. It is necessary, I argue, to examine aquatic safety as specialized information, falsely associated with a label of neutrality, in order to showcase how it actually

exhibits a persuasive nature that actively shapes how it appears in conversations within public realms. However, before discussing the understanding of what it means to learn and teach aquatic safety, we should seek the definition of another crucial and connected concept: What does it mean to drown?

Drowning, one of the most frequently cited hazards associated with aquatic safety, is a commonplace necessary to (re)define here—much like aquatic safety itself, "drowning" is a term that serves as a screen in many aquatic education arguments, largely due to its oversimplified definition that comes with a supposed objective truth. According to various dictionaries, drowning is, *by definition*, "to die under water … by submerging under water" or "suffocation [under other liquid]" ("Drown"). This definition means a liquid substance, most often water, must cover a person's airway enough to reduce continuous flow of oxygen to the body ("Drown"). This common definition is accompanied by a sense of objective understanding, suggesting there is one usual meaning of the word, thus making the dictionary definition appear neutral and true. In actuality, such a definition is problematic because drowning is a process that does not exist within a vacuum of objectivity. In fact, the dictionary use of "submerging" alone metaphorically suggests that drowning primarily occurs in deep water instances; however, according to the World Health Organization, mere centimeters of water can be enough to induce a drowning ("World Injury Report"). The ways in which people rhetorically comprehend drowning through this vacuum does not account for the nuances surrounding how drowning events of various sorts may occur in a multiplicity of actual life scenarios; thus examining definitions of drowning as static and subjective illuminates the ideological

understanding of drowning that colors the common assumptions within societies who place their beliefs on the objective "truth" of solidified definitions.

If readers see the definition of drowning as simple, can the process be just as uniform and as simple to recognize? Contrary to its simplified definition and the popular commonplace that it is an obvious affair, drowning is a complex event. In "It Doesn't Look Like They're Drowning: How To Recognize the Instinctive Drowning Response" for *On Scene: The Journal of U.S. Coast Guard Search and Rescue*, Mario Vittone and Francesco A. Pia explain how drowning is not "what we see on television"; in real life, it is not an extremely active or vocal struggle by the victim (14). Rather, people in the midst of drowning are generally unable to call for aid because water is affecting their respiratory system, inhibiting their ability to be vocal. They are rarely able to wave because their arms are busy trying to push against the water in order to get their mouths above surface level, and people actively drowning maintain a vertical position, meaning there is never evidence of kicking occurring (14)—so splashing is unlikely. These subtle signs contribute to what makes drowning a dangerously silent and generally unnoticed event that occurs in mere seconds, an event that is incorrectly represented in popular media, and an event that is a top concern in the field of safety. In fact, one report from the World Health Organization notes that over 175,000 deaths by drowning incidents took place in 2004 for people ranging from 0-19 years old alone ("World Injury Report"). The International Life Saving Federation, however, suggests that, though drowning is one of the top causes of accidental death in the world, a large percentage of these tragic incidents may actually be preventable. Yet, as among many of the leading global health organizations and domestic health facilities in the United States, the issue of "drowning" (oversimplified in its many iterations) is the most frequently and singularly discussed issue in aquatics, and in this way it functions as a screen covering an entire realm of potential aquatic emergencies.

Commonplaces of Aquatic Safety

With this (re)conceptualization of drowning in mind, the focus of this essay becomes determining how people come to perceive the term "preventable" as a commonplace in a larger context of aquatic situations, one that acknowledges and extends past a screen of drowning as the only "true" hazard in aquatics. For the remainder of this essay, I turn to the practices of assumed prevention—*what people do to protect and educate themselves and others about how to remain safe in aquatic environment*. I will ask and answer the following question: when people speak about preventing aquatic emergencies, about promoting "aquatic safety," what are the arguments they are really making? If a term such as *drowning* cannot be fully objective and neutral, it seems absurd to suggest that aquatic safety can be defined in similar simplified, objective terms. Yet, even with all of the discussion on social media and blog sites about aquatic safety that reveal public commonplace beliefs, there is little critical discourse surrounding the ways in which this aspect of safety education is concretely defined.

In one previous study, Kjendlie et al. piece together various definitions common in discussions of what constitutes as "safety" in aquatic environments in an attempt to

define the idea themselves. Their research presents a "comprehensive" method which reaches into the various layers of water risk and prevention that make finding a simple definition of aquatic safety more difficult. Kjendlie et al. go on to say that even people under the terministic screen of "good swimmers" have drowned, which suggests that skill alone is not actually enough to prevent aquatic emergencies. Instead, they suggest a comprehensive model that teaches "a) all-around aquatic skill, b) knowledge of general and local conditions, c) an attitude of healthy respect for the elements and for the frailty of and human error, d) the ability to make correct judgements in risk situations." This model does not operate under the assumptions connected to the commonplace metaphor that knowing how to swim equates to remaining safe; rather, their inclusive definition allows a more nuanced understanding of the term to develop.

Based on such research, I argue that drowning, and some other potential aquatic emergencies, are recognized as frequent and dangerous but ultimately "preventable" problems. However, the concept of prevention has significant variation in its forms of presentation, which is vital to recognize because how the general public perceives aquatic safety shapes what they believe about the types of prevention they advocate for. Because the commonplace "represent[s] what the community believes to be true," gathering the general public's definitions of the term *aquatic safety* and testing their awareness of safety measures is one of the most important strategies to understanding public perceptions of aquatic safety (Pepper 2). In order to uncover the hidden spaces of argument that Cicero and Quintilian speak of, I surveyed 35 parents and 20 certified

lifeguards/swim instructors to simultaneously test their current knowledge set and require them to provide their own definitions of what constitutes aquatic safety.

In the surveys, a large margin of parents (almost 95 percent) state that they feel highly confident in their ability to identify potential aquatic emergencies; however, in opposition of that confidence statistic, 94 percent of the same participants could not identify "two inches of water" as a possible safety hazard, suggesting that identifying potential emergencies is not as palpable as the general public assumes (see Fig. 1). These data suggest two things about the existing pool of knowledge: 1) Few people recognize that aquatic emergencies are not easy to notice, but, rather, are difficult to recognize; and 2) current aquatic safety education does not teach aquatic safety on the number of levels suggested by a comprehensive model definition.

1. Unfavorable weather conditions
2. Rough open waters
3. Two inches of water on the ground
4. Lack of swimming ability
5. Lack of life jacket in sources of open water

Figure 1
Parent's potential answers to "Which of the following presents a potential aquatic safety concern? Select all that apply." Though they were not told beforehand, all five options present potential aquatic safety concerns.

In addition, many parents' responses suggest that the term *aquatic safety* only encompasses "learn[ing] how to swim," "being able to swim," "having knowledge of proper swim techniques,"

"having enough … skill in the water to be able to swim," and "tak[ing] swim lessons." These parental definitions revolve around the need to practice swim skill alone, thus screening the importance of other skills and topics of safety. The equation of aquatic safety to the ability to swim appears as the most frequent commonplace metaphor found within the surveys. With these definitions, parents reveal an underlying perception that the ability to swim should be universal, and that the ability to swim on one's own will prevent aquatic tragedy entirely. However, several YUSA and Red Cross-certified swim instructors state that the ability to swim is not truly universal, with one even suggesting that the notion that everyone can learn to swim well is "false advertisement."

Another interesting commonplace arises when parents explain learning expectations for their children during swim lessons. Here, "basic" becomes one of the terms that appears most frequently in parental responses (see Fig. 2). Whether it is "basic skill," "basic swim strokes," "basic understanding," or "basic knowledge," the use of *basic* as a modifier denotes a conception that certain aspects of aquatic safety are far simpler than others, or implies that certain aspects are more important to overall safety than others. This commonplace is problematic because it encourages neglecting one area of safety in favor of others.

"How to float on back, swim to ladder or wall, properly breathe (hold breathe) underwater"

"I would expect my child to learn proper techniques when swimming. For example, if the child becomes tired, they should know how to do the back float"

"Basic skills"

"How to react to self-emergency situations such as drowning."

"For an individual not to drown"

"Child learning to swim very well"

"Knowing how to swim"

"How to float or tread water, if in situation where they are tired, too far from shore, etc."

"Basic skills"

"How to stay on top of the water, swim (paddle) to the shore or wall, and float"

"How to float. How to keep their head above water. Basic swim strokes."

"Basic understanding of standard moves, to continue past lesson time"

"The ability to keep himself from drowning"

"How to swim, what to do if they fall in, how to get out to safety"

"Being comfortable in the water, eliminating 'panic mode.'"

"To be able to swim"

"Advance her swimming skills"

Figure 2
What Parents Believe Swim Lessons Should Teach about Aquatic Safety. Quotations from survey of parents' definitions of safety-related knowledge.

While deconstructing the terms above is vital to coloring an understanding of parental definitions of aquatic safety, it is also vital to investigate *how* conclusions (see Fig. 2) are manifested and perpetuated into the structure of the ideological narrative. One way to observe these patterns of safety conversation is by examining how common programs designed to help ease worry by creating a "safer" environment for children can actually work against building a comprehensive aquatic education. Looking into these programs to locate patterns in presentation of aquatic safety may aid in determining why a majority of the general public reduces aquatic safety to the possession of, as many parents state, swim skills.

Many pool facilities perpetuate this simplified narrative through implementation of swim testing procedures, which are advertised as protective measures for ensuring the safety of children in aquatic areas. According to 2018 YMCA regulations, a swim test is only passed when a swimmer sufficiently does freestyle (or front-crawl) for twenty-five meters without stopping, treads water for sixty seconds continuously, and jumps in the deep end then exits the pool safely (YMCA of Costal GA). The design of swim tests is to challenge the swim skill level, primarily swimming endurance, of those under the age of eighteen and act as a deciding factor in how much access to the pool (e.g. using the deep-end, diving boards, slides) they receive. However, when responding to whether they have "ever remained greatly concerned for the safety of a child even after he/she passed a test that proved 'swim ability'," all 20 lifeguards in this survey group stated that even children who pass facility swim tests can still present concerns for safety.

One lifeguard even suggested that passing children and granting them full pool access through swim tests alone "can potentially make the child more dangerous [because s/he] has the confidence to swim but not the safety awareness" that is necessary to behave safely. This response suggests that swim testing serves as more of a confidence booster for both children and parents than a fully effective measure of implementing and educating people about what it really means to be safe. The same pattern is present in the rhetoric of aquatic advertisement which encourages children to "Go for Green" (i.e., pass a swim test) regardless of their actual swim ability and safety awareness levels (YMCA of Costal GA). This form of advertisement further emphasizes the commonplace that having the ability to swim is synonymous with being safe in the water; "going for green" screens the necessity for broader knowledge regarding aquatic safety, rendering it invisible or irrelevant. However, the advertisement method also implies that those who do not have this capability are inferior—a suggestion that may push people to try something that is not safe in order to fit in with others.

This recurring pattern in understanding, the belief that swim skill equals safety in aquatic environments, is also evident in how children are educated about the water. Emphasis is most often placed on the ability to swim, rather than on specifically teaching safety practices. While swimming skill is an unarguably important factor for safety in aquatic areas, it may not be the most effective means of keeping safe in these environments. Safety spans a broader horizon than one dictionary definition or one set of skills can cover. My research demonstrates that one of the most popular underlying beliefs among parents is that swimming

skills are *the* way to prevent aquatic emergencies; however, we can also state that these parent groups do not even fully understand how to gauge the nuances of drowning alone. So it is worth asking: how is it possible to achieve aquatic safety if the general public continues to perpetuate false ideologies with misunderstood commonplaces?

Unfortunately, even swim lessons work in an almost counterproductive fashion because they perpetuate the "skill equals safety" perception. Many programs teach their brand of aquatic safety by using a generalized version of swim lesson curriculum that is followed by instructors at their aquatic facilities. Though this practice seems beneficial because it provides a set standard for education, these safety sections of the curricula are minute in comparison to the sections discussing daily plans for instruction of swim skill. The drastic differences in topic time that appear in most swim lesson curricula suggest that swimming is top priority, and that it may serve as a stand-in (or terministic screen) for the concept of safety itself. In addition, most lesson plans are accompanied by a level-based check sheet to record children's progress throughout their sessions. This check sheet consists of two sections: skills and safety topics. While the inclusion of safety topics is important, next to the list of skills, it is rendered unimpressive and unspecific (see Appendices A and B). Moreover, though the skills section will change according to lesson level, the safety topics remain stagnant rather than growing to encompass more complex and new information (see Fig. 3). Allowing the safety section to remain unchanged suggests that there is little to learn about the topic; the growing list of skills suggests there is always far more to learn about swimming strokes.

These suggestions, however, present switched realities because, while there are not more than four competitive strokes (and two non-competitive strokes), safety topics extend into the hundreds.

Safety Topics

____ Knows never to swim alone

____ Knows and can demonstrate to reach and throw but not to go

____ Can put on a life jacket
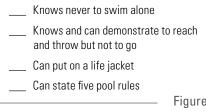
____ Can state five pool rules

Figure 3
Example Safety Checklist for
Lesson Sessions

Two programs out of Austin, Texas, Project S.A.F.E. and SwimATX, built new modules of aquatic education by addressing the need to create a curriculum that covers a multifaceted approach to safety. Project S.A.F.E. is designed to be implemented as a PE credit course for children in the lower levels of grade school. The program splits each lesson into two 40-minute periods, with one devoted to swim skill and the other to aquatic safety, in an effort to provide children with the tools needed to remain safe in aquatic environments. Combining skill and safety lessons in equal portions lowers the likelihood of the general public creating a false commonplace that situates the importance of swim skill far above other aquatic safety topics. Project S.A.F.E. is also designed to help children "create a platform … to engage parents in conversations about safety issues" they learn in classes ("Project S.A.F.E."). Through shifting the way aquatic safety is discussed, such programs essentially change how the topic is being understood and thus may affect which commonplaces

are being perpetuated among and by the general public.

The Austin YMCA's other experimental program, SwimATX, also works to change how aquatic safety appears in conversation, but begins the educational shift at the high school level. Like Project S.A.F.E., SwimATX functions as a PE credit for students; however, the change in the participant age range is deliberate, teaching a more nuanced concept of safety that employs language and practices more appropriate for an older audience. SwimATX teaches comprehensive aquatic safety concepts in enough detail to prepare high school students to obtain Red Cross lifeguard certifications after completion of their program. The program even encourages this take on safety by providing those who finish the program with scholarships that cover the costs of lifeguard certification courses ("SwimATX"). Such a change in educational practice creates a drastic shift in the rhetorical approach to education by emphasizing learning and practicing aquatic safety beyond the act of swimming alone. Successfully completing lifeguard training requires students to have immense safety knowledge, strong swim ability, and thorough overall aquatic awareness; the SwimATX program uses these assets in combination to teach participants what creates a dangerous environment and what constitutes an aquatic emergency. The shift in language of education that occurs through training as a lifeguard allows for the elimination of the commonplace metaphor that swim skill automatically equates to aquatic safety. Schools can thus take advantage of comprehensive programs that take up aquatic safety as a multifaceted term on multiple fronts, a tactic that may be necessary in the future for teaching any topic requiring a comprehensive definition like that of aquatic safety.

While drowning is recognized by organizations like WHO and the CDC as a worldwide issues, changing education must occur one step at a time, even if that step if changing how aquatic safety is defined for research. This essay asserts a comprehensive model in hopes of providing a starting point for further research that may help create swim policy based on a new commonplace that better reflects a thorough understanding of aquatic safety. Policy (i.e., educational program curriculum) shifts like the ones made by SwimATX and Project S.A.F.E. may be excellent model programs worth implementing for the benefit the general public as a community and the health of all those within the community. To change the narrative surrounding aquatic safety, the current commonplace that swim skill equals aquatic safety must be deconstructed so the general public may begin understand that "swimming skill" is not a stand-in, synonymous term for complete aquatic safety.

Appendix A

A swim lesson check sheet for Level 2 "Eel" swim lessons. This sheet is checked off as the swimmer progresses, and the skill section must be completed in full for the child to advance to the next level. "Eel" level is aimed at children between the ages of 3 and 5.

Skills

___ Floats on front and without assistance

___ Floats on back without assistance

___ Front glides for 5ft without assistance

___ Kicks on their front with board for 15ft

___ Kicks with kickboard and demonstrates rotary breathing for 5ft

___ Front crawls for 15ft without assistance

___ Can advance forward swimming the front crawl and flip to their back and back float

___ Back glides without assistance for 5ft

___ Back crawls without assistance for 15ft

___ Jumps into the pool from a standing position

___ Retrieves item from the bottom of the pool

Safety Topics

___ Knows never to swim alone

___ Knows and can demonstrate to reach and throw but not to go

___ Can put on a life jacket

___ Can state five pool rules

Appendix B

A swim lesson check sheet for Level 6 "Minnow" swim lessons. As with the "Eel" sheet (Appendix A), this sheet is checked off as the swimmer progresses, and the skill section must be completed in full for the child to advance to the next level. "Minnow" is the highest level offered and in general is aimed at children between the ages of 6 and 12.

Skills

___ Performs 25 bobs

___ Kicks with kickboard with rotary breathing

___ Swims front crawl for 25ft

___ Swims backstroke for 25ft

___ Can roll from front to back and back to front

___ Jumps into pool from standing position

___ Can tread water for 1 minute

___ Can kick breaststroke kick with a kickboard for 25 yards

___ Can swim breaststroke for 25ft

___ Kicks butterfly kick with a kickboard

___ Attempts butterfly arms and legs together

___ Retrieves item from bottom of the pool

Safety Topics

___ Knows never to swim alone

___ Knows and can demonstrate to reach and throw but not to go

___ Can put on a life jacket

___ Can state five pool rules

Acknowledgements

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