

Practical Application in Organizational Communication: A Historical Snapshot and Challenge for the Future

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Practical application in organizational communication is evident in translational and engaged scholarship, consulting activities, leadership in discipline-wide service positions, and case studies used in teaching and scholarship. Despite this history of excellence, efforts have focused primarily on organizational problems, and the field continues to elevate epistemological and conceptual issues above expertise in craft practice. One partial solution is to further focus on concrete experience, improvisation, and practical wisdom.

A Historical Snapshot of Practical Application in Organizational Communication

Organizational communication was known early on within the larger discipline for being interested in practical application. This came, in part, via to its leadership of the International Communication Association's (ICA) communication audit. Similar to a physician's check-up, through collecting data about key communication experiences, the ICA audit promised to help organizations "prevent major breakdowns that limit overall effectiveness" (Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1977, p. 41). By 1977, the audit had been performed at 18 organizations with a sample of more than 8,000. However, the audit and its affiliated scholar-consultants were critiqued as being atheoretical, consultant-fee driven,

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and managerialist. Over time, organizational communication scholars found alternate avenues for auditing and the field has broadened its practical application activities as exemplified in a variety of ways:

- *Management Communication Quarterly (MCQ)* editors have regularly required authors to include a “Practical Applications” section in their empirical manuscripts.
- Organizational communication scholars have repeatedly served as editor for *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (e.g., Joann Keyton, Michelle Jackson, David Seibold, Katherine Miller, and Deborah Dougherty).
- Organizational/small group communication scholar Joann Keyton was instrumental in founding and serving as first editor for *Communication Currents* (www.CommunicationCurrents.com), a website that recurrently showcases organizational communication scholarship translated into short readable essays.
- Organizational communication researchers regularly coordinate special forums on “translation,” “application,” and “public scholarship” (e.g., Ashcraft, 2002; Barge, 2001; Cheney, Wilhelmasson, & Zorn, 2002; Rush & Tracy, 2010; Tracy, 2007).
- The yearly meeting of the Aspen Conference for Engaged Scholarship (<http://www.aspenengaged.org/>) features organizational communication scholars as keynote speakers and panelists, and has focused on ways that organizational communication intersects with practical concerns.
- Practical application has been one of five primary domains in the vicennial conference “Organizational Communication Traditions, Transitions, and Transformations” (Downs, 1999) each of the 3 times that it has convened.

Although there are far too many people to list here, scholars who have been especially influential in practical application efforts in organizational communication include Kevin Barge, Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, Jennifer Simpson, Sue Dewine, David Seibold, Joann Keyton, and Eric Eisenberg.

Another primary way organizational communication has engaged in practical application is via case study creation and analysis. For example, Zorn (1997) examined Weaver St. Market as a case on workplace democracy—and how to improve the low morale and ironic lack of cooperativeness among a market co-op. Most cases, like this one, exemplify problematic or ethically questionable organizational situations and apply various organizational concepts (identification, crisis communication, hegemony) to shed light on, solve, or improve the situation (Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2004, 2007;

May, 2012; Sypher, 1997). The same is true in terms of the types of movies most commonly screened in organizational communication courses. Popular choices include *Office Space* (Rappaport, Rotenberg, & Judge, 1999), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (Tokofsky, Zupnik, & Foley, 1992), *The Devil Wears Prada* (Finerman & Frankel, 2006), and *The Big Short* (Gardner, Kleiner, Milchan, Pitt, & McKay, 2015). These movies focus on the dehumanizing or unethical aspects of organizing—issues like unscrupulous financial conduct, workplace bullying, and toxic organizational cultures.

In short, the field of organizational communication has been a locus of activity for engaged, applied research; however, the field is less robust in the display, study, and training of practices that would create expert or masterful ways of organizing. Certainly, some case studies focus on positive exemplars, such as Zoller and Meloncon (2013) who examined community activism at work. Even in such analyses, however, the preponderance of the case material focuses on *describing*, *analyzing*, and *theorizing* the situation at hand. Such an approach is very helpful for building theory and understanding the epistemological aspects of (or knowledge about) organizations and organizational communication. Yet, this scholarship, does little to *show* or *inspire* behavior and interaction that make for preferred organizational communication practices that achieve desired outcomes.

This focus on epistemology over craft practice is illustrated, for instance, in an analysis of organizational communication syllabi and textbooks (Tracy, Franks, Brooks, & Hoffman, 2015), which found that typical organizational communication course objectives commonly ask students to “analyze,” “critique,” “understand,” “assess,” and “describe.” Certainly, in some classes, students are asked to “apply.” However, even in these cases, the characteristic process by which this unfolds is asking students to first read and learn about the theory, and then watch movies or analyze case studies where organizational processes went awry. And, what is the weakness of this typical case study approach? As noted by Tracy et al. (2015):

The case study approach . . . has the advantage of moving from memorization of concepts to application of ideas in context (Flyvbjerg, 2012). That said, it still relegates students to being spectators; the theory is “out there” to be “understood” and then applied to a situation “out there” that students may (or may not) personally encounter (p. 323).

These activities are helpful for practically building one skill in particular—critical thinking and analysis. However, besides critical thinking, we rarely ask students or readers to “practice,” “communicate” or “be” so as to create organizational communication mastery for themselves or in others.

Moving From Epistemological Application to Improvised Craft Practice

Organizational communication scholarship and teaching has been historically very useful for building knowledge about, problematizing, and theorizing. We fill our journals with these discussions, create careers, design centers, and produce doctoral programs where theorizing thrives (Ashcraft, 2002). Meanwhile, we have maintained a branch of the discipline that is devoted to practical application. As noted above, this comes in many forms such as applying theory to case studies, having a section on practical application in research articles, meeting and working with practitioners via engaged scholarship, and writing translation essays on our scholarship for public audiences. But is this enough?

Application suggests that people first learn *about* theories, identify a problem these concepts fit, and then *apply* that knowledge. Such activities are very useful for falsifying or bolstering organizational theories and may help translate epistemological knowledge to alternate audiences. What is more, such activities may valuably show why and how a problem unfolded (which could potentially help others avoid it in the future). Nonetheless, application always privileges a priori conceptual knowledge divorced from context and ignores the fact that expertise, practical wisdom, and being in the world are not created by applying something.

Neither epistemological knowledge building nor practical *application* activities are enough for creating expertise or practical wisdom in organizational communication. For that, we need experience. Indeed, “engaging a context, complete with the shock and messiness that accompanies the happenstance of concrete social situations, is vital for clarifying moral issues and problems” (Tracy, 2007, p. 107). As noted by Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008), referencing Barge and Little (2002),

Students need to develop their phronetic capabilities to improvise, because wise action is never about the straightforward application of a single theory to sort out what to do next; wise action is about acting in the moment, improvising with the available theoretical and practical materials at hand, and engaging in *bricolage* to respond to the unique circumstances constituting a situation. (p. 256)

Moreover, “bodily involvement, speed, and an intimate knowledge of concrete cases in the form of good examples is a prerequisite for true expertise” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 15). So, what might this look like in practice? Certainly, there are a host of ways scholars may engage in research and teaching so that readers and students gain access to craft practice—and vast literatures on experiential and transformative learning that tease out some of these methods

(Mezirow, 2000). However, I do want to provide at least one example of moving application toward being—one that readers might be able adapt the next time they write or teach a case study.

My friend and colleague Loril Gosset creatively made use of a case study and related video-recorded performance that chronicles an ethically questionable cruise ship game in which staff were expected to cheer and smile as passengers straddled them and bounced on a balloon in their laps (Tracy, 2009). After her students read the case study, Loril told her class that she wanted to show them exactly what the game looked like. She asked for a volunteer—someone, as she said, was “one of the more confident/outspoken students because they are less likely to freak out and actually play along” (L. Gossett, personal communication, July 14, 2016) and spoke about the power of a performative method. As she began the video, the students became visibly nervous and excited, in anticipation of what was to come. To most everyone’s relief, she stopped the role-playing activity just short of the actual balloon (lap bouncing) game. Loril then proceeded to ask her student volunteer what he was thinking and feeling at the prospect of reenacting the game and asked the rest of the class about their feelings about the almost-reenactment. After the nervous laughter subsided, her students discussed the dread and discomfort of being asked to perform this sexualized form of emotional labor and noted how curious it was that none of them had resisted despite their unease at both performing and witnessing a fellow student reenact the balloon game.

Loril’s activity provided the students with more than the epistemological and applied knowledge that would have normally been available by asking students to read the case and then apply concepts of emotional labor. Rather, the activity provided them with experiential access to understanding emotional labor at an embodied visceral level. They felt the strange mixture of dread, excitement, and humiliation that often accompanies emotion labor, and were triggered to empathically appreciate how difficult it is to resist organizational expectations. This type of activity suggests powerful lessons that come from practicing organizational issues (or even “anticipating practicing” them) rather than simply learning theoretical concepts by reading, talking, analyzing, and applying them to hypothetical external situations.

In conclusion, as we look toward the next 20 years, my hope is that organizational communication scholars acknowledge the limits of practically applying epistemological knowledge for creating expert practice, and move beyond reliance on case studies that focus on organizational problems. As an alternative, my colleagues and I have are developing a research and teaching approach that draws from literature in ontology, phenomenology, phronesis, and transformative learning (Tracy et al., 2015). This approach—focused on

ways to promote craft practice, improvisation, and bricolage—suggests the importance of examining positive deviants of communication mastery, exercising self-reflexivity, exploring how language can create contexts for transformation, and encouraging practice of communication crafts in contexts where actors have a stake in their performance. Such an approach may build upon the strong foundation of practical impact developed in organizational communication over the last 40 years and push us to new levels of excellence in the future.

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