The Communication Triad: A Participatory Model
for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Communication

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I. Introduction

As an area of research, instructional communication has struggled to map out the role of communication in the teaching process (Sprague, 1992). More recently, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) movement has emphasized the importance of applying the same systematic, informed rigor in our teaching that we do in our research pursuits (Cohen, 1997; Cohen, Barton & Fast, 1999). Both concepts share considerable overlap and stem from the desire to improve education. But how can one advance the SOTL beyond buzzword status and put it into substantive practice? For communication educators, the key to applying scholarly rigor to the improvement of their teaching lies first in embracing all sides of the communication discipline and then in capitalizing on the many similarities between what they are teaching (communication) and the act of good teaching itself. These prerequisites are vital to a full understanding of the discipline and to generating thoughtful questions about how its teaching might be improved. This paper proposes a model that facilitates discipline-wide understanding for communication educators by illustrating the connections between three components of the discipline—professional practice, the classroom, and the research academy. The model suggests that familiarity with each of the three components increases our purview of the discipline and enables a more thoughtful inquiry into the teaching of communication.

Figure 1

Three elements of the communication discipline joined visually.

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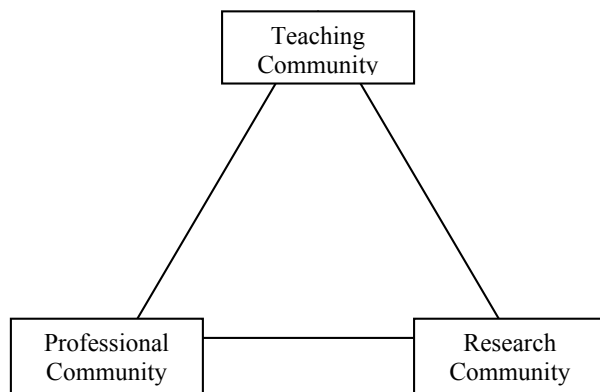
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II. The Communication Discipline as a Whole Composed of Its Parts

Much has been written about the supposed divide between the research academy and the newsroom (Pew Center, 2000; Riffe, Hedgepeth & Ziesenis, 1992), and arguably, the communication classroom is out of touch with both (Duhe & Zukowski, 1997; Bolding, 1996). Even among communication educators, there are those who embrace the industry by reading only trade publications, while a separate group embraces academia by reading only research journals (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1998). It is clear that in some ways, the discipline has become a segregated lot with distinctly separate points of focus. So where are these different perspectives on communication located? What are the various vantage points from which the discipline can be observed, and what insights do they offer for this quest of self-improvement from within the craft?

Obviously, one is the media. Without professional journalists and their product, mass communication would not resemble what we know it as today. J-schools are surely another point. They may be the only place on earth where you'll be given the definition of a nut graph or a news peg without asking for it. Scholarly research, too, is a home for the discipline of communication. It's there that the theories of our discipline are incubated.

It seems that interest in communication has arisen and evolved simultaneously in newsrooms, classrooms and academic research circles, but these three domains do not always overlap in practice or in the exchange of ideas. These "points" of the communication model—the teaching community, professional community, and research community—all have something vital to offer us in our quest to become better teachers through the SOTL. Only in knowing each of them can communication educators achieve full disciplinary understanding, and only then are they prepared to systematically and empirically approach the improvement of their teaching. For communication educators, this way of thinking about their subject matter and their teaching practices should be a useful examination of familiar ideas from a combined perspective that they may not have considered before. It is the similarity between the teaching process (pedagogy) and what is being taught (communication) that allows the three-way model of intradisciplinary improvement to be uniquely useful for the teaching of communication.

III. The Teaching Community

"Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach" is a jab that working professionals often take at teachers and researchers. Lee Shulman (1986) provided academics with a strong defense to such banter when he wrote. "Those who can, do. Those who understand, teach." The comeback means that effective communication teachers are not failed practitioners who took up another line of work, but rather holistic communication experts who maintain and integrate skills from the discipline's professional, pedagogical, and research communities. It is only through such discipline-wide synthesis that real understanding and the SOTL can be achieved.

For communication faculty who "understand" (as Shulman defines it), it is clear that the act of teaching and the act of communicating share many similarities. That's why the "teaching point" of this model belongs here as a legitimate member of the communication discipline. The field of instructional communication affirms that fact by recognizing that teaching is itself a specialized form of communication. Whether it's a course in documentary film or an introductory newswriting class, bringing students to the "same page" as the instructor—establishing common ground—will itself emphasize many of the higher-order goals and

objectives of the curriculum. Good teaching implements some of the same observational and synthesis skills that are listed among the desired outcomes of communication courses.

The best communication is clear, straightforward communication that tells people what they need to know without confusing them. It anticipates and pre-empts uncertainty and, where possible, provides an avenue for feedback. This simplicity is not necessarily the key to excellence in mathematics, biology, engineering, or other disciplines, but for communication, it is the stock of the trade. It just so happens that the methods of clear communication also make some of the best teaching strategies.

Instructors face a complex task in teaching communication skills and concepts to their students. To do so, they must synthesize their insight of the discipline just as professional practitioners do when faced with a novel communication situation. In general, both must work diligently to be sure that the correct message is meaningfully understood in the correct context.

These parallels between teaching and communication become especially relevant when the subject being taught is communication. Shulman (1997) asserts that a profession requires the ability to navigate a complex variety of circumstances and that to do so necessitates a "deep understanding" of the discipline and possession of higher-order skills in its areas of specialty. These skills are what communication students are in school to learn. To best handle the task, communication faculty should polish their teaching skills while staying on top of their discipline by maintaining professional skills at the same level they would if working in the industry.

It has been argued that teaching communication requires a special set of skills that mirror the metacognitive, self-monitoring skills of communication itself (Book, 1989). The idea that communication educators with experience in the industry would be best equipped to capitalize on these similarities of process between communication and pedagogy is supported in the education literature. For example, Sarah Dinham (1996) asserts that in addition to knowledge about teaching and knowledge about the discipline, the best teachers must have "discipline-specific teaching knowledge." Dinham explains that discipline-specific teaching knowledge goes beyond a working knowledge of the subject matter to include an ability to adapt the disciplinary concepts in an infinite number of ways to best suit the teaching needs at hand. Such higher-order synthesis can only come from the mastery of the whole discipline—in the case of communication, its teaching, research, and professional communities. For communication educators, such mastery necessarily involves membership in all three communities.

As communication educators seeking the SOTL consume current education literature emphasizing collaborative, engaged, and student-centered learning (Eggen & Kauchak, 1999), they will begin to see many conceptual similarities to trends currently shaping the direction of communication and the media, including newsroom teams, civic journalism, and a new awareness of "audience." Conceptualizing those similarities is a big step toward both the SOTL and the broader understanding described in Dinham's discipline-specific teaching skills.

Pursuing the SOTL is about becoming an "expert" teacher. To borrow from schema theory, it can be said that when a communication educator's teaching schema and professional practice schema are each rich and strong, a considerable amount of generalization will occur between them as knowledge and skills are exchanged (Walls, 1999). The result will be even more connections in the schema network, which, according to schema theory, is what distinguishes expert, higher-order proficiency from lower levels of ability. The more connections that are made between the teaching schema and the professional practice schema, the more thorough, creative, and effective the instructor will be in facilitating meaningful understanding among students.

So for communication professionals heading into the classroom as teachers, it's worth noting that the skills gained in the work world are not simply **what** they should teach but a strong blueprint for **how** they should teach as well. The skills owned by the best reporters—finding the truth, extracting the essence of a complex process or situation and helping others to understand it, perhaps even better than they ever could have on their own—are the same skills that make great communication teachers. In short, this teaching point of the model can be said to show that "to communicate is to teach; to teach is to communicate."

IV. TheProfessional Community

After interviewing hundreds of reporters, researchers at the Pew Center for the People and the Press concluded that for most journalists, being able to communicate for a living was the most compelling influence guiding them to their chosen careers (Pew Center, 1999). The sincere desire to communicate thoroughly on the part of professional journalists includes making sure that the message they're sending is clearly and fully understood (Burgoon, Bernstein & Burgoon, 1983).

For journalists, this drive to fully enlighten can overshadow other commonly touted roles of the media. In a survey of journalists and news consumers, Burgoon et al. (1983) found that reporters rated the goal of "explaining how important events and issues relate to the community" highest of eight possible functions of the media, including "uncovering wrongdoings," "providing a thorough (historical) record of events," and the "watchdog role" of the press.

When the Department of Journalism at Ball State University sought to identify differences in the news selection processes employed by student and professional journalists, they found that professional reporters were driven by the need to fully inform (teach) their audiences by explaining all possible aspects of the issue or topic being communicated (Pitts, 1987). Whereas the less-skilled student journalists in the experiment were content to provide a less-than-thorough explanation, professional reporters were frustrated if they were unable to provide their audiences with complete insight. Just as good teachers want their students to have the most enriching educational experience possible, professional communicators are motivated to communicate in ways that result in learning and full understanding.

All this would seem to suggest that communication educators who have worked as professional communicators have much to offer in the classroom, and indeed they do. There is evidence in the literature to suggest that everyone, even diehard academics, agrees on the value of realistic, job-specific instruction (Duhe & Zukowski, 1985; Oregon Report, 1987). But the need for association flows both ways. Newsroom research by the Freedom Forum (1994) indicates that working journalists are starving for additional instruction about how to do their jobs. Of 652 journalists surveyed at 123 daily newspapers in 1993, a consistent majority reported dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of training, instruction and skills seminars offered by their employers. They also indicated that outside training programs were much more effective and popular than in-house programs. About 22 percent of outside training for reporters is offered by nearby colleges or universities, creating an ideal pathway through which to begin connecting the newsroom and the classroom.

Such a connection is not a new idea. Phillip Gaunt, who has researched in detail the history of journalism training throughout the world, writes that the United States has a long history of co-mingling between professional practitioners and J-schools. As early as 1912, major newspapers were throwing significant funding into J-schools at various public and private universities (Gaunt, 1992). And internships, which are now seen as a mutually beneficial

arrangement between the industry and J-schools, were soon to follow. By the late 20th century, 80 percent of graduates who found work in their field participated in an internship (1991 Journalism Career and Scholarship Guide, 1990).

But there is still a rift between academics and working journalists. A survey of newspaper editors by the American Society of Newspaper Editors suggests that media professionals believe one of the best ways to make J-schools better is to have more work-hardened journalists in teaching positions. When J-school faculty have previous professional experience in the media, it's easier for them to serve as ambassadors to both the newsroom and the classroom. The idea of work-hardened faculty serving as a bridge between the newsroom and the classroom facilitates the model proposed here and advances the pursuit of the SOTL for communication educators.

Journalism teachers can remain active in the newsroom by serving as a stringer or correspondent for a local newspaper. As a part-time contributor, it may be possible for a journalism teacher to cover the regular meetings of a city council or similar event. Such meetings usually take place only twice a month on weeknights, so they would not interfere with the daytime duties of a faculty member. Those with strong ties to a local paper often write a regular column or contribute to the op-ed page. Whatever the arrangement, finding a way to simultaneously occupy all corners of the discipline is invaluable for communication educators in pursuit of the SOTL.

After 17 years of teaching, Jan Whitt (1995), an assistant professor of Journalism at the University of Colorado, returned to the newsroom to refresh the skills she teaches her students. Whitt asserts that it is vital for educators to acquire professional experience before they teach and to maintain it throughout their careers to avoid stagnating and drifting out of touch with the changing industry. After returning to the newspaper, Whitt wrote, "Perhaps I have a clearer answer to the student question, 'If the media are such exciting places to work, why did you leave?' I now say, 'Two answers really. I love to teach, and I never really left the newsroom.'"

V. The Research Community

As fascinating as this interplay between the practice and teaching of communication might be, there's more to the story. The model includes a third layer— research. For the SOTL, the research component is important because, not coincidentally, the SOTL concept is built on the idea of emulating the rigor of empiricism and research in one's teaching pursuits. If the communication discipline is going to thrive, its research must be connected to the other parts of the discipline. But communication research doesn't make it into the classroom nearly as often as it should (Book, 1989), and it receives an even chillier reception in the professional world (Pew Center, 2000). What that means is that few people with a good understanding of the communication research literature are involved successfully with the other points of the model, and vice-versa. The scarcity of people with a comfortable foothold in all three points of the model means that few are truly able to claim complete understanding of the discipline.

Book (1989) argues that "translators" are needed to make the fruits of research more accessible. But who has the ability to do this translating and a reason for wanting to? The most feasible candidate seems to be the communication educator who knows the importance of true disciplinary understanding.

In September 2000, 17 journalists and editors met for a symposium sponsored by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. Their mission was to "create new lifelines between journalists and academics." Titled "Cracking the Code," the symposium generated plenty of dialogue that fits this paper's model well. The ideas put forth during the "Cracking the Code" symposium centered

around trying to foster relationships between the two camps. However, most such relations have proved to be contrived and short-lived, perhaps because none was conceived around the one motive for interconnection that lasts—true mastery of all points within the discipline. Phil Meyer, professor of journalism at the University of North Carolina, asserts that academics and journalists don't connect well because they have different priorities.

"The newspaper business is now a business that doesn't want to go to much trouble to do stuff that doesn't have an immediate payoff. That's why they don't connect with academics, because we think in the very long term and they think in the very near term, and our horizons are just too different" (Pew Center, 2000).

Meyer is correct to point out that, individually, researchers and professional practitioners will have very different horizons if the extent of their focus is on their respective corners of the discipline. Only someone whose goal is mastery of the entire discipline is likely to aspire to long-term membership in both camps, but that is exactly what is needed to fully inform one's teaching as a communication educator.

Another way of winning acceptance for research in the newsroom is to begin with students who are studying communication. When students are familiarized with research, the benefits include a greater awareness of what academic research is all about and how communication theory is developed and tested. Too many undergraduate students finish their academic careers without ever knowing that the research community exists. The idea that new knowledge is generated through scholarly inquiry is a foreign concept to them. They see "research" as looking something up in the encyclopedia, not as the production and testing of novel hypotheses. If communication educators were plugged into the discipline's research community, such an oversight could be avoided.

When exposed to the research mindset by an educator who embraces the SOTL, communication students benefit from improved critical thinking skills, a better awareness of how data can improve certain news stories and how to separate scientifically valid research from junk polls and bad science. These basic research skills are important to working journalists as well, but the value of theory-based academic research for the newsroom is a tougher sell, in part because it is greatly misunderstood (Pew Center, 2000). The value of complex, theory-based communication research does not lie in some utilitarian application that a copy editor can make use of in a jam, but rather in exploring the state of the discipline, making predictions about it, and, to some extent, shaping its future. Communication educators who understand and embrace this component of the SOTL will be far better able to impart the benefits of academic research in their classrooms than will their colleagues who do not. This is because they have a more thorough conceptual grasp of the entire discipline and thus can better synthesize it for their students. It allows the development of sophisticated repertoires for engaging the subject matter (Walls, 1999). Knowing the research literature will enable communication faculty to synthesize the discipline, making rich inferences and connections that would be impossible for those without such a familiarity. Only those teachers who have this mastery of the research literature and who can make it accessible to students will truly have the full view of what communication education should be. It is they who are equipped to implement the SOTL.

VI. Connecting the Model

If drawn as a model, the three elements of the communication discipline (education, research, and professional practice) form a triangle with a series of two-way connections among each of its points. The term "triangulation" describes using two other known fixed points to put

one's own position into context. When thought of in this way, the model proposed here allows communication educators to put their teaching into proper disciplinary context because they are aware of how the professional and research communities relate to their classroom. Dinham (1996) describes this pedagogical view of "context" by saying that teaching must not be conducted in a vacuum. Instead, it must be placed in the context of a "larger curriculum." In this case, that larger curriculum can be seen as the communication discipline's three communities.

It is possible to be a teacher, a practitioner, and a researcher all separately, but perhaps communication education is best served when these roles are blended with one another in mind. Only someone with an intimate, working knowledge of each can claim true disciplinary understanding. A communication educator who pursues that goal will surely find the SOTL along the way.

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