



**INSTRUCTIONAL
COMMUNICATION**
IN PROFESSIONAL
C O N T E X T S

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Instructional Communication in Professional Contexts

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Introduction

Michael G. Strawser & Derek Lane

Communication remains a relatively young academic discipline according to contemporary standards. However, despite our discipline's infancy in traditional higher education contexts, "communicators" have been practical problem solvers for centuries, dating back to the beginning of recorded history (Friedrich, 1987). As our academic discipline evolved, numerous concentration areas arose that reinforced communication across the spectrum of human experience. Instructional communication—the academic study of communication in and through all educational contexts regardless of grade-level setting or subject matter, with a unique emphasis on the blended triumvirate of educational psychology, pedagogy, and communication (Mottet & Beebe, 2006)—is one of these foundational topic areas. What makes instructional communication research (ICR) unique is this melded research approach with tentacles that reach into all other academic disciplines and professional contexts, with an emphasis on education or instruction writ large.

Unfortunately, instructional communication researchers continue to limit our potential impact, especially outside the academy, for a host of reasons (Strawser & Sellnow, 2019). The conversation surrounding the role of instructional communication is not new and has, in fact, become somewhat routine and predictable. Despite this repeated conversation, we find ourselves (yet again) at a crossroads because of the changing nature of education and the workplace.

A review of recent meta-analyses specific to communication education reveals interesting distinctions of our focus as those who study communication education and, more broadly, instructional communication. Starting in 2001, Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax revealed ICR research categorizations that center on student communication, teacher communication, mass media effects on children, pedagogical methods/technology use, classroom management, and teacher–student interaction. Nussbaum and Friedrich (2005), similarly, found student communication, teacher communication, mass media effects on children, pedagogical methods/tech use, classroom management, and teacher–student interaction as central foci of recent instructional communication research. Not surprisingly, Myers et al. (2016) found similarities as they explored the types of articles found in *Communication Education* from 1976–2014. Specifically, their results reveal an overwhelming focus on articles that focus primarily on undergraduate student participants and college instructors and discuss topics that include instructor characteristics, instructor classroom behaviors, student characteristics, student classroom behaviors, student learning outcomes, learning environment, mediated communication, program evaluation, and instructional content (Myers et al., 2016). Finally, in their 2017 content analysis of *Communication Education*, Conley and Ah Yun (2017) found that research published in this flagship journal tends to “derive most of its data from surveys, administered to college students, and predominantly focuses on refining and further exploring previous research topics in new contexts” (p. 451). While their participants did

look extremely similar, with the majority of studies focusing on college students and instructors, their topic areas were represented uniquely. Specifically, Conley and Ah Yun (2017) found affective learning, public speaking, teacher immediacy, cognitive learning, pedagogy, communication apprehension, communication competence, communication across the curriculum, teacher clarity, teacher credibility, and motivation as the preeminent topics/keywords represented in *Communication Education*. Collectively, these analyses reveal a focus on a (a) particular participant population and (b) consistent instructional variables.

Purpose of This Volume: Expanding the Research Agenda

As you can imagine, for the purposes of this volume, these revelations are purposefully selected. Ironically, two major themes seem to arise when we consider the breadth and depth of analyses of instructional research. For one, we tend to focus our considerations on the flagship journal, *Communication Education*. And, embedded within this journal we tend to focus on Sprague's (2002) "E5" category (college students, predominantly in communication courses, and college instructors). We believe this type of research has been, is, and will continue to be valuable for instructional communication. However, we do believe that instructional research goes beyond these traditional contexts and that it is important to find synergy and commonality with those in other communication topic areas who are doing important instructional research. Additionally, we recognize that instructional researchers publish their work in journals other than *Communication Education*, in journals that may not even be communication centric because of the interdisciplinary approach to ICR. As a result, this volume was initiated to further discuss instructional research that transcends the typical college classroom and those distinctives predominantly explored by *Communication Education*.

This volume approaches instructional research from a broader perspective, moving toward what Sprague (2002) references as “bigger questions” that transcend our traditional university environment. Five professional contexts were selected to represent areas where instructional research has been prominent beyond the academy. Specifically, chapters in this volume address instructional research in the following contexts: (a) learning and development, (b) organizational, (c) health, (d) technology, and (e) risk and crisis. These contexts are not exhaustive, as other professional environments can be obvious environments for instructional research, but they do represent several distinct contexts where instructional research has been influential.

Our reality is indicative of a larger movement. We must evolve to address necessary changes needed to continue to expand the instructional communication research agenda. Most “instructional research to date examines communication among teachers and students in conventional classroom contexts. Although past and present research is prolific and informative, it is also somewhat limiting” (Sellnow & Limperos et al., 2015, p. 417). And while our more traditional, university-centered research still has substantial value, we believe instructional researchers must continue to expand and address those crucial questions highlighted by Sprague (2002) and other pillars of our discipline. As such, this volume is designed to address the current status of instructional communication as a necessity for professional contexts, not just college communication classrooms. This book highlights several areas where instructional communication researchers can, and should, expand a research agenda that transcends our typical context, thus increasing our relevance beyond the academy. The topics addressed in this text, health communication, risk and crisis, organizational, learning and development, and technology, present professional contexts where instructional scholars can explore communication in and through all educational contexts. Within each topical part there are two

chapters—where have we come and where are we going. The following section provides an overview of each topic area addressed in this book.

Learning and Development

For obvious reasons, the connection between instructional communication and the education sector at large remains a primary area of study for instructional communication scholars. In their part, focused on learning and development, Angela Hosek, Scott Titsworth, Carly Densmore, and Grace Sikapokoo reinforce intersections between ICR and applied settings outside of the actual classroom. Focusing on learning broadly, the authors explore the connection between instructors and learning. Their approach focuses on the exploration of learning through the primary domains (cognitive, affective, and behavioral), and they position instructional communication as a means of continuing to prepare students for our modern professional landscape, where employers routinely desire communication competence from their employees. They believe that in the future, instructional researchers will continue to explore content related to employer-desired skills (e.g., listening, reading, writing, speaking, etc.) while extending our understanding of learning and training.

Organizational

Stephen Spates and Shawn Wahl discuss instructional communication through varied organizational contexts. Recognizing that instructional communication is multifaceted and widely applicable, Spates and Wahl argue that the connecting factor is effective learning. They answer questions surrounding the influence of schools, the role of the instructor, the functional role of language in education, as well as other pressing questions. They transition, then, to the exploration of trending organizational contexts, including health, technology, as well as

corporate and finally technical professions. They express, rightly, the position that “no matter the discipline, organization, or profession, instructional communication practices are made for successful learning. Instructors who engage in approaches that promote authentic and sustainable learning will find success for their learning experience.” The designation of future areas of importance for instructional researchers include technology and artificial intelligence, risk/crisis, sports, as well as the legal system.

Health

As Teresa Thompson, Nichole Egbert, Heather Carmack, Yan Tian, Angela Cooke-Jackson, and Michael Mackert illustrate in their chapters, health communication has evolved from an emergent subdiscipline to a thriving focus of communication. As an area of focus for instructional communication scholars, health communication is a robust area of study in part because of its sheer influence not just on college curricula but on interprofessional health practitioner training and patient communication. Their chapters discuss the ever-present reality that “health educators have a responsibility to their communities and publics to ethically confront and engage current and future health issues and crises, providing learning spaces for everyone to become more informed consumers and decision-makers.” Instructional researchers, especially those who focus on health communication, can be genuine difference makers. As an area of instructional research, health communication must remain a staple of engagement inside and outside the academy.

Technology

In their forward-thinking part on technology, Nick Bowman, Kyle R. Vareberg, Kenneth T. Rocker, Stephanie Kelly, and David Westerman try to reign in the often-considered “*Wild Wild West*” of new educational

technologies. Their chapters review the historical development and implementation of technology in education, through the instructional communication scholarship lens. They conclude, rightly, that “technology has always been ‘normal’ in the classroom, that it can be used well or not, and that we (instructional researchers and others) have always debated this use.” Practically, they show that technology is and will remain a powerful force for education and that it is not a magic wand or panacea yet should be a continued focus for instructional scholars. In a plea to educators, they argue that “to effectively use technology to deliver education, technology must be chosen carefully to meet the learning objectives and accompanied by strategic instructional communication tailored to the specific CMC (computer-mediated communication) channel and technologies being used.”

Risk and Crisis

In the last part of this volume, Jeffrey Brand approaches instructional communication in the professional sphere by first mentioning four distinct long-term realities that communication, as a discipline, must continue to seek. It is important holistically to consider how these challenges provide context for how instructional communication scholars should approach their research. The four challenges mentioned in Brand’s chapters include establishing respect for the field (i.e., communication) in academic and public arenas; the need to create a research-grounded body of knowledge; a desire to generate knowledge that contributes to solving social problems; and finally, promoting communication-based theory and practice for use and awareness by nonacademic publics. We cannot ignore the fact that we must be conducting applied research that can be shared beyond our immediate spheres of influences. These realities provide a foundation for the remainder of Brand’s argument. He thus addresses the role of instructional communication research in the risk and crisis context

and provides insight into how ICR is used to study and solve risk and crisis problems. His first chapter explores basic risk and crisis concepts and demonstrates how instructional communication research meets risk and crisis needs. Brand's second chapter identifies new directions and potential avenues to expand risk and crisis situations.

The chapters in this volume strategically explore the historical development of instructional communication in unique contexts. However, it is also necessary to understand, holistically, how instructional communication research has developed and the roots of this subdiscipline in order to proactively engage in a conversation about our future. Therefore, the next section provides a brief history of instructional communication research as well as a picture of the present and a call to address our future.

Historical Development

Communication historians have suggested that contemporary speech courses for teachers were offered at Indiana University as early as 1892 but that such courses were common by 1920 (Cohen, 1994; Delia, 1987; Schramm, 1997; Smith, 1954; Wallace, 1954). It is remarkable, however, that communication education graduate programs designed to produce communication researchers that could develop instructional communication theory based on empirical research conducted in instructional contexts did not appear until the late 1960s. Over the next 35 years, several strong instructional communication graduate programs emerged that produced quality programmatic research used to improve instructional practices across multiple grade levels and disciplines. Unfortunately, communication education was dropped as a disciplinary emphasis from the 2004 reputation study because too few doctoral programs were offering a specialization in instructional communication.

The critical turning point for instructional communication as a doctoral specialty in U.S. universities seems to have occurred sometime between 1972 (when the International Communication Association created the Instructional and Development Division) and 1976 (when we changed the name of our discipline's second oldest journal, *Speech Teacher*, originally published in 1952, to *Communication Education*; Friedrich, 1987).

Barker (1989) describes the key players, influences, and origins of two doctoral programs in communication education that focused explicitly on the interface between communication and instruction—one at Purdue University (1967) and the other at Florida State University (1970). According to Barker's personal account, the events that shaped the course of communication at two American universities—with a behavioral science influence—occurred because of the mix of personnel interested in communication education, grant funding from the U.S. Department of Education, outstanding resources, and enthusiastically committed graduate students.

The key players included Robert J. (Bob) Kibler, Larry L. Barker, Theodore (Ted) Clevenger, Jr., William D. (Bill) Brooks, and Gustav (Gus) Friedrich—all of whom were hired to teach at Purdue University in 1967. The early graduates from the Purdue program were William (Bill) Seiler (who was responsible for creating the instructional communication program at the University of Nebraska), Jo Sprague (whose critical teaching and learning scholarship set the agenda for instructional communication research for nearly 2 decades) and Don Cegala (who is best known for his research on patient education in health contexts). In 1970, Kibler and Barker left Purdue to join Clevenger at Florida State University in Tallahassee in order to create a new communication education graduate program. While serendipity and good timing were responsible for the two earliest communication education doctoral programs, the primary characteristic of those instructional

communication programs that followed was the individual communication scholar—and their students.

The next key event occurred 2 years later, in 1972, when the traditional speech program at West Virginia University was transformed into an empirically oriented communication program designed to study the role of communication in classroom environments. Richmond (1989) explains that the antecedents of the WVU instructional communication graduate program were Penn State's Speech Communication Teacher Workshop program and—not surprising—the Florida State doctoral program with an emphasis on communication in instruction. McCroskey and Richmond (1992) provide a concise rationale, complete with course descriptions, objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment protocols for the WVU instructional communication program for in-service teachers. It is worth noting that no instructional communication program, so far, has exceeded the standards established by those built at WVU from 1972 and culminating with the creation of a doctoral program in 2005. In fact, as can readily be obtained from data contained in research productivity reports published over the past several decades, no single communication researcher to date has been as prolific as James C. McCroskey (Edwards et al., 1988; Hickson et al., 2003). Furthermore, the contributions of McCroskey, Richmond, and their colleagues and students at WVU cannot be overemphasized. In a communication research productivity analysis spanning 1915–2001, WVU was ranked number one with 328 cites, followed by Michigan State University with 239 cites (Hickson et al., 2004). In a shorter analysis of research productivity (1996–2001), Hickson et al. (2003) suggest that the most common profile regarding institution is that one would be teaching at West Virginia University, holding a terminal degree from Michigan State University, graduating in 1988.

Major advances in the status of communication education research were made possible by two pivotal conferences held in the 1980s. The first, according to Friedrich (1987), was the Speech

Communication Association Regional Research Seminar that was held in Michigan in the fall of 1983 and the spring of 1984. Key participants included Gus Friedrich (University of Nebraska), Cassandra Book (Northwestern University), and Jerry Feezel and Rebecca Rubin (both of Kent State). The results of the seminar were published as a symposium entitled “The Scholars Anthology: The Research Agenda for Communication Education in a special issue of the *Central States Speech Journal* in 1985. The second critical conference was organized by Jody Nyquist and held on the University of Washington campus in July of 1985. The Summer Conference on Instructional Communication, as it was named, included participation from Friedrich, Book, Donald Wulff, Janis Anderson, and Ann Staton-Spicer. In his summary of instructional communication research, Friedrich (1987) enthusiastically described instructional communication as “an exciting and active area of research within the communication discipline, which has attracted a core group of scholars who are producing quality, programmatic work” (p. 9). These historical roots have led to the development of additional flagship journals, doctoral programs that emphasize instructional communication research, and other consideration. The next section identifies and assesses the current status of instructional communication.

Current Status Assessment

In their review of instructional and developmental communication theory and research in the 1990s, Waldeck et al. (2001) identify the scope, major theories, and major lines of research and outlets for publication, as well as the future of instructional and developmental communication. Over the span of nine years (1990–1999), 42% of the research published was related to student communication; followed by 31% related to teacher communication, and 10% related to both mass media effects on children and pedagogical methods/technology use. Less than

4% was related to classroom management and teacher–student interaction. Sixty-six percent of all instructional communication studies were published in one of three journals: *Communication Education* (47%), *Communication Research Reports* (7%), and *Communication Quarterly* (12%). Waldeck and her colleagues criticized instructional communication as not being programmatic, containing too much conceptual and operational overlap, and being largely atheoretical. These criticisms are consistent with those raised by Friedrich (1987) a decade before when he argued that instructional communication research suffered from many of the problems identified by Scott and Wheelless in the 1970s (variable analytic; atheoretical; nonprogrammatic; no focus on actual classroom behavior or student–teacher interaction). In a follow-up review of instructional/development communication published in 2005, Nussbaum and Friedrich echoed the sentiments of Waldeck and her colleagues and also argued that instructional research should become more balanced along the developmental continuum by moving outside college classrooms to include younger and older learners. They also criticized instructional research for being overly reliant on logical empiricism and called for the inclusion of more interpretive and critical traditions to inform instructional communication knowledge claims. Almost 20 years later, we still struggle with similar challenges.

Given the current status of instructional communication researchers (many of whom are teaching at standalone MA programs) and the dearth of instructional communication doctoral programs, the future of instructional communication is nebulous at best. But it does not have to be.

A Nebulous Future?

This chapter thus far has traced the historical development of instructional communication in order to assess their current status and anticipate the future of communication education research in U.S.

universities. While there has been substantial progress made with respect to knowledge claims that can be used to improve instructional practices (e.g., *Handbook of Instructional Communication*), there is some concern about the future. It is necessary for more doctoral programs to be created that focus on instructional issues—preferably issues that are fundable (e.g., NIH, NINR, NIDA). We suggest programs might integrate the trend to include more of an emphasis on ICR beyond the university classroom and through other professional contexts. New theories must be developed and tested that move beyond the application of interpersonal or mass communication theories in the university classroom. In the current political climate of Common Core State Standards (CCSS; which at the time of this writing are dying a slow death) and accountability, we must make *learning* the bottom line and determine the most successful strategies for improving learning outcomes no matter the educational context. For instance, there is currently a demand in medical and engineering education for assistance in improving curriculum, instructional strategies, and behavioral competencies. Instructional communication research has much to offer. We are, as Gladwell aptly describes it, at a tipping point. What can we do? What must we do?

Conclusion

Hopefully the tone of this chapter is not received as unintentionally dire. Quite the opposite is true. Instructional communication research can continue to be an influential area of study moving forward. Realistically, we must adapt to our changing context and climate and pursue questions that transcend the university environment without forsaking the good work accomplished within our college communication departments. This volume hopefully continues a conversation that has been ongoing for decades. How do instructional communication researchers lend our expertise to help solve problems inside and outside of the academy?