

FORUM: WHAT IS COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY?



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Instructional Communication Scholarship: Complementing Communication Pedagogy

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Instructional communication “refers to the study of the human communication process across all learning situations independent of the subject matter, the grade level, or the learning environment” (Myers, Tindage, & Atkinson, 2016, p. 13). Accordingly, much of instructional communication scholarship is generalizable, providing pedagogical findings about “communication variables, strategies, processes, technologies, and/or systems as they relate to formal instruction and the acquisition and modification of learning outcomes” which are “applicable to many disciplines, educational levels, and environments” (Lashbrook & Wheelless, 1979, p. 439). Although instructional communication scholars historically have examined effective teaching behaviors that foster student affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978), they also study communication processes in the classroom (see Witt, 2016), which include instructor characteristics and actions (e.g., how instructors effectively provide written or oral feedback to students), student characteristics and attitudes (e.g., how students’ communication apprehension affects their group work), pedagogy and classroom management (e.g., how classroom technology policies encourage student engagement), and developmental communication across the lifespan (e.g., how children and adult learners benefit from communication training programs). More recent instructional scholarship has continued to examine effective teaching behaviors (Conley & Ah Yun, 2017), but with a greater focus on understanding student communication behaviors in the classroom (Mazer & Graham, 2015).

How Does Instructional Communication Inform Communication Pedagogy?

Instructional communication is relevant to communication pedagogy because at its core, instructional communication is studied as a three-way intersection (Farris, Houser, & Hosek, 2018) among the disciplines of pedagogy (with a focus on teaching), educational psychology (with a focus on the student

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learner), and communication (with a focus on meaning and messages). Instructional communication offers a general perspective on instructor communication competence in the classroom, and what it offers to communication pedagogy is a core pedagogical repertoire of effective teaching behaviors that optimize students' learning in any course, despite the course's learning outcomes or subject matter.

Therefore, instructional communication and communication pedagogy are complementary areas of inquiry; that is, communication instructors will not be effective educators without strategically considering—for each course taught in a given semester—both pedagogical techniques (e.g., writing accurate course objectives; choosing or creating activities that align with the objectives; teaching communication skills using proven pedagogical strategies) and instructional communication practices (e.g., communicating with students clearly; confirming students; integrating appropriate humor). These disciplines offer micro (i.e., communication pedagogy) and macro (i.e., instructional communication) perspectives on teaching that both deserve close attention as instructors strive to be the best educators (and communicators) in the communication courses that they teach.

When I think of instructional communication scholarship and how it informs my teaching, I am most drawn to the programmatic research conducted to date on instructor clarity. For nearly five decades, instructor clarity research has offered our discipline teaching behaviors that help students' understand the course material (Titsworth, Mazer, Goodboy, Bolkan, & Myers, 2015). Clarity during teaching is communicated to students in a multitude of ways (i.e., preinstructional clarity, organizational clarity, explanatory clarity, language clarity, adaptive clarity; see Titsworth & Mazer, 2016) and starts before we even begin teaching a lesson as we provide students with advanced organizers (e.g., a graphic organizer such as a timeline) so they can identify the most important parts of a lesson. We know that structuring our messages in a clear format will help students learn (e.g., providing students with a note-taking handout with major points hierarchically organized). We know that the order in which we present material matters for student understanding, so we consider how we present and time our examples in a lecture (e.g., scaffolding examples so students apply their knowledge to several examples in class). We know that the words we choose to convey course concepts is important so we make sure we avoid unclear language (e.g., word mazes that require us to start over and try again with a new explanation). We know that clarity is a process of mutual classroom understanding, so we present information in a way that does not exceed students' working memory limits (e.g., keep the amount of information on a PowerPoint slide to 5 or less chunks of information) and allows students to check for misunderstandings (e.g., taking class time to stop and answer students' questions, repeat material that is not well-understood). In my own teaching, I prioritize clarity not only because it has the greatest impact on my students' learning potential (Titsworth et al., 2015), but also because my students view it as the most essential teaching behavior instructors can use in the classroom (Goldman, Cranmer, Sollitto, Labelle, & Lancaster, 2017).

Conclusion

Indeed, the bodies of instructional communication scholarship and communication pedagogy scholarship inform each other reciprocally. When we teach communication competencies to our students using the best pedagogical practices derived from communication pedagogy, we also should serve as model communicators for our students by incorporating effective teaching behaviors gleaned from instructional communication. Both bodies of literature should speak to us in tandem when we consider how to best teach our students.

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