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Organizing the Organizational Communication Course: Content and Pedagogical Recommendations

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Abstract: Organizational communication extends beyond communication that takes place in an organizational context to the ways communication is used to organize and facilitate activity. This article is designed to enhance organizational communication pedagogy practices by highlighting foundational concepts and content areas that should be included in undergraduate organizational communication courses. Additionally, four active learning assignments, including case studies, applied organizational communication theory papers, organizational audits, and media assignments, are described to enhance student engagement with class material and to assess student learning. Finally, the article includes common issues to help educators anticipate concerns and plan effective classroom strategies.

Students often enroll in organizational communication courses because they want to learn how to communicate effectively as an organizational member; in other words, they expect to gain professional skills to prepare themselves for work. While many organizational communication textbooks provide some insight into business communication skills (e.g., working in teams, using communication technology, communicating during conflict or crisis), they also focus on how communication organizes understanding and behavior. Importantly, organizational communication explores the ways communication constructs and constitutes organizations (Deetz & Eger, 2014). As Putnam and Mumby (2014) established, “without rhetoric, communication, and persuasion, we would have no organization”

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(p. 2). Organizational communication occurs not only in formal workplaces, but in volunteer groups, educational institutions, religious organizations, and across societies.

When communication is presented as an organizing mechanism, students gain an appreciation for how behaviors shape understanding and sensemaking, contest or reify behavior patterns, influence perceptions of identity and membership, create or limit opportunities for teamwork and leadership, perpetuate or resist organizational cultures, and provide an opportunity to negotiate intersections between hierarchical structures. Recognizing the organizing power of communication allows students to better understand organizational experiences *and* leverage this knowledge to adapt their communication to a rapidly evolving world. This article explores foundational principles and content that organizational communication students should learn, provides several assignments to enhance engaged learning, and discusses some of the challenges in teaching organizational communication.

Foundations

The communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) serves as an overarching umbrella under which organizational communication generally is researched and taught. Miller (2015) explained that understanding communication as constitutive provides an important “metamodel—an overarching way of thinking about communication” (p. 13). Further, Eisenberg, Trethewey, LeGreco, and Goodall (2017) contended that “the history of human civilization is fundamentally a history of *organizing*” (italics in original, p. 3). Organizational communication constructs individual and collective understandings (Deetz & Eger, 2014) and influences the interplay between individuals’ desire for autonomy and institutional goals for control and organizing (Conrad & Poole, 2005).

Within this CCO perspective, organizational communication courses should include some foundational elements. These elements include historical context: students should learn about classical and relational approaches, Taylorism, and the Hawthorne studies to understand the interplay between organizational members and leaders. Further, foundational theories that should be discussed include organizational assimilation, systems theory, structuration, sensemaking, stages of group development, Dewey’s standard agenda for decision-making, member roles, trait leadership theory, leadership styles theory (i.e., democratic, authoritarian, and laissez-faire), situational leadership, transformational leadership, emotional labor, organizational identity, and critical organizational theory. This list is not exhaustive, but instead serves to highlight central concepts in organizational communication that students should understand when completing the class.

Content Areas

Organizational communication courses include an array of content areas. We surveyed six organizational communication textbooks to determine the most frequently represented content areas (Brewer & Westerman, 2018; Conrad & Poole, 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2017; Kramer & Bisel, 2017; Miller, 2015; Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 2008). These areas include:

- ▶ Defining Organizational Communication
 - ▶ Approaches and Orientations to Organizational Communication
 - ▶ Organizational Communication Systems and Networks
 - ▶ Organizational Culture
 - ▶ Becoming an Organizational Member
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- ▶ Team and Group Communication
- ▶ Leadership
- ▶ Organizational Conflict and/or Conflict Management
- ▶ Ethics
- ▶ Organizational Change and Crisis Communication
- ▶ New Trends/Changing World of Work (common topics include technology, diversity, globalization, and work/life concerns)

In addition, content areas included in some of the textbooks or embedded in chapters in other books include Power, Emotions, Critical Approaches, Feminist Approaches, and Postmodern Approaches.

Applied Assignments

In building connections between classroom learning of foundational concepts and content areas, active learning strategies and assignments encourage problem-solving, developing creative solutions, and enhance student learning and attention span (Markant, Ruggeri, Gureckis, & Xu, 2016; Sousa, 2011). Therefore, four active learning applied assignments are offered for organizational communication courses.

Case study assignments help students view organizational communication theory in action and provide a common context for analysis. Several case study textbooks are geared specifically toward the organizational communication course (see Anderson, 2012; Bisel & Kramer, in press; Fyke, Faris, & Buzzanell, 2017; May, 2013). Case study assignments can be structured as group or individual projects. In addition to traditional assignment forms (e.g., exams, papers, presentations), students also can be asked to create a short training video based on a case or write their own cases to share in class. Case studies should involve identifying a theory pertaining to the case (e.g., emotional labor, structuration, authoritarian leadership), explaining the theory, and using the theory to analyze the communication and implications.

An *applied organizational communication theory paper* allows students to integrate the information they learn about organizational communication theories in two ways. First, students articulate how they see their identity in the “world” of contemporary organizational communication theory: do they see themselves thinking in terms of systems, cultural, constitutive, or critical approaches? [And why?] Students then analyze an organization with which they are familiar through several lenses of organizational communication, such as systems theory, cultural theory, constitutive approaches, or critical approaches. For each required theoretical approach, students answer these questions as a way to directly apply theory to experience:

- ▶ What key concepts or terms would be used to study your organization through _____ theory?
- ▶ What aspects of your organization stand out through this lens?
- ▶ What assumptions would be made about the effectiveness of your organization through this lens?
- ▶ What suggestions might a _____ theorist make about your organization?

Organizational audits involve students working individually or in groups to observe an organization, apply theories and class concepts evident in the organization, and then make theory-based organizational recommendations to enhance communication. The recommendations can be delivered in written

or verbal forms and may be structured in different ways to accentuate particular learning objectives. Further, this assignment can be a community-engaged research project, requiring students to make a presentation to a community client.

Media assignments help students make connections to organizational communication concepts in the media. Students (or groups) select specific content areas (e.g., socialization, leadership, change/crisis, diversity, emotional labor) and identify examples of these areas in the media (e.g., television shows, movies, books, articles, current events). Students then use concepts from their content area to analyze the examples. Students deliver a brief presentation highlighting the examples and analysis, then lead class discussion where all class members critically analyze the examples. These discussions enable students to learn about course concepts in more depth and across multiple organizational contexts.

Issues to Consider

Organizational communication courses have much to offer students through foundational theories, strong content units, and applied assignments. However, teaching organizational communication also comes with challenges. To begin, students enter the course with diverse educational backgrounds and college majors. Students outside of the communication major may be drawn to (or required to take) the course to help them prepare for graduation and enter the workforce. Consequently, because student majors often vary from communication, not all students will have similar foundational knowledge about the communication discipline. Instructors should consider asking students preliminary questions (formally or informally) to determine necessary foundational communication content that needs to be covered or reviewed before delving into more complex organizational communication topics.

A related challenge is that often students (particularly from other majors) take communication for granted and assume the course will not be rigorous. These assumptions can make it difficult to engage students in deep critical thinking and analysis to question taken-for-granted assumptions and to identify how communication is shaping their understanding through discursive practices. Using applied assignments and modeling those assignments in class through scaffolding content and activities can help overcome this challenge.

Another challenge is that students enter the classroom with a range of organizational experiences and expectations. A study conducted by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (2015) reported that 70% of college students work while enrolled in classes, with 40% of employed students working 30 hours or more. However, there also are students who have no work experience and they often worry about (not) having enough experience to contribute to class discussions. Further, variations in experience can be challenging if students view their experience as natural and dismiss other student experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a supportive classroom climate that honors *all* student experiences to help students recognize the fundamental organizing features of communication.

While differences in majors and work experiences produce challenges, they also create valuable learning opportunities. A wide range of students bring in diverse examples and insight that enable all students to connect concepts and examples across organizational contexts as well as to volunteer groups, community groups, and educational institutions. Diverse examples provide opportunities to connect course material in unexpected ways, enabling students to think more critically about course concepts.

Conclusion

This article provided foundational elements, standard content areas, applied assignments, and important considerations to enhance pedagogical practices and help educators engage students. The organizational communication class has the potential to positively influence students throughout their lifetimes and help them communicate appropriately and effectively at work, but also in the myriad organizations with which they interact daily. Leveraging the idea of how communication organizes allows students to think critically about their own and others' behaviors, and adapt to the increasingly changing world in which they live.

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