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COMMENTARY

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Past, Present, and Future

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Janus, the Roman mythological figure usually depicted as having two faces, one in the back of his head looking to the past and the other in the front looking toward the future, is an apt metaphor for the goals of the Publications Board of the Association for Business Communication's (ABC) special session at the 2005 annual meeting in Irvine, California. Titled "Business Communication Research: Past, Present, and Future," this session, very much like Janus, simultaneously looked to our research past and future to explore the value our research has provided, to give us a clearer idea of why we are focusing on the research we are currently engaged in, and to suggest future research that both academics and practitioners will appreciate.

The session's five-person panel, made up of ABC Outstanding Research Award winners and 2005 Best Publication Award recipients, included Janis Forman (University of California, Los Angeles), Daphne Jameson (Cornell University), Gina Poncini (University of Milan and

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University of Lugano), Pris Rogers (University of Michigan), and Dorothy Winsor (Iowa State University). These participants, all very active researchers, are housed in a variety of academic departments—management, hotel administration, English, and political science—and work in Europe, Asia, and the United States. This diversity resulted in panel members' responding to questions posed by the session facilitator, Jim Suchan, from different disciplinary and cultural angles. These responses also helped create a lively 90-minute dialogue with the approximately 30 ABC members attending the session that continued well after the formal session ended.

This commentary tells the story of that session. We have woven the various strands of the session dialogue into a narrative that highlights the significant research progress we have made over the past 20 years, describes the research tensions that exist as we try to provide work of value to both practitioners and the academy, addresses our field's struggle to establish a research identity, and outlines the work we need to be doing in the near term and midterm.

To prime the five-member panel's thinking processes, the two session facilitators provided the following questions to the panelists several weeks before the session:

1. What new communication knowledge has our research created? To whom has it been important: researchers, instructors, practitioners? What has been the impact of that new knowledge on our key stakeholders?
2. Which research areas need more attention? What are the broad-based research questions or issues we need to address? Whose communication concerns are influencing our perception of research areas needing attention?
3. What disciplinary areas inform our communication research? What areas can we look to for interesting theory, models, and conceptual frameworks to expand our own and our important stakeholders' understanding of communication?
4. How can business and managerial communication research strengthen our field's value and thus improve its position in the academy and with practitioners?

These questions were used merely as prompts during the session. We expected that the interaction between session participants and the panel would result in interesting improvisational runs (to use a jazz metaphor) from the session's major themes (its riffs). We were not disappointed. Although the panel did not address each question in detail, the participants' responses did provide intriguing riffs and runs that simultaneously mirrored and improvised on the theme of the conference: business communication's past, present, and future.

LOOKING BACKWARD: NEW KNOWLEDGE WE HAVE CREATED

Panel members cited organizational genre, narrative, and discourse analysis, particularly of everyday workplace conversations, as several major areas in which the field has generated new knowledge. Perhaps Dorothy Winsor's comment is most telling. She said that our most important contribution is research that helps us "better understand what actually happens with communication in the business workplace." Using methods such as ethnography, naturalistic inquiry, participant observation, and case analysis, studies by Cross (1994, 2001), Henry (2000), Winsor (1996, 2003), Yates and Orlikowski (1992), and Orlikowski and Yates (1994), for example, have made workplace communication come alive by illustrating the myriad organizational and situational factors that influence how texts are created, interpreted, and used.

That knowledge, Dorothy Winsor and Pris Rogers pointed out, did not exist 20 to 25 years ago. During the 1980s, we often relied on checklists, rubrics, and simple guidelines to describe and define effective workplace writing and speaking. We turned to these simple, acontextual ways of describing effective communication for several reasons. First, we often used undergraduate students to conduct pseudo–laboratory experiments to prove the value of the communication practices we taught. Second, we lacked theories and frameworks that rooted communication practice within organizational contexts. As Winsor suggested, we have developed over the past two decades a more robust, context-based framework for assessing workplace communication. Furthermore, an increasing number of us are using these frameworks and the theories that inform them in workplace settings. This combination of theories and frameworks applied to workplace communication has helped generate not only more sophisticated research but also more effective undergraduate and MBA communication instruction.

Despite these gains in new knowledge, Daphne Jameson pointed out that business and managerial communication researchers need to provide practitioners with a better understanding of best practices. However, Daphne observed that communicating to students and other practitioners best practices obtained from fieldwork and consulting is often difficult because that information is proprietary. As one session participant passionately pointed out, reprimands provide a concrete example of a lack of best communication practices despite significant research in communication, psychology, and organizational behavior in areas such as feedback, negative reinforcement, morale, and motivation. In short, communication researchers need to more directly link their work—basic or applied research—to the everyday communication practices of managers and support staff members. If they are incapable or unwilling to do so, businesspeople will continue to be unaware of or ignore the research we produce.

This issue of the value and importance of best-practices research generated lively debate among panel members and session participants. Some claimed that the best-practices concept is flawed because it is too prescriptive and leads to formulaic responses to communication situations. This type of research could result in acontextual guidelines that are not all that different from the rubrics, prescriptions, and checklists that characterized far too much business communication instruction and textbooks 20 years ago. In fact, too great a focus on best-practices research could undermine the discipline's movement toward organizational-context-based work, which some believe is our discipline's most significant research contribution. However, others argued that best practices can be context specific. In fact, undergraduates, MBAs, and practitioners need—often demand—best practices that apply to their organizations.

FOR WHOM DO WE CREATE NEW KNOWLEDGE?

This best-practices debate surfaced the long-standing tension between the pragmatic communication needs of business, industry, and the public sector and the role of the academy to generate theory that informs, indeed guides, practitioners' communication strategies and practice. Furthermore, the debate segued into the fundamental questions: For whom do we create new knowledge, and what is our research responsibility?

Kathy Rentz described well the difference in roles between practitioners and academics. She stated that practitioners draw on institutional communication lore to define their communication actions because they have to respond quickly to communication situations. However, researchers have the time, energy, and resources—both intellectual through our education and ongoing research and financial because of the function, purpose, and our role as part of a university—to look with care at business communication challenges and puzzles. Moreover, we have the time, the incentives, and the ability to be careful and methodical in our work. We recognize the importance of using appropriate research designs and methodologies to answer important questions. Furthermore, we have been trained to synthesize concepts and theories from other fields, integrate them into communication theory, and apply this new understanding to business communication problems.

As one session participant pointed out, the concepts and theories that our research creates can open new windows for managers to see their communication worlds differently and thus provide a new way of thinking about managerial communications. These new ways of thinking and the different workplace conversations they produce can alter over time the communication lore in a department, a function, or even an organization and thus alter communication practice.

However, several panelists observed that business communication does not create its own theories. We borrow theory from other disciplines—rhetoric, management, organizational theory, psychology—and celebrate that fact by describing ourselves as multi- or interdisciplinary. Although the label *multidisciplinary* enables us to be inclusive (perhaps too inclusive) of researchers from a large number of areas, that open-endedness creates a significant identity problem for the field. That lack of a clear identity may make our work invisible to business practitioners and even to our colleagues in related disciplines.

Sessions participants echoed this concern about our research field's identity. One participant pointed out, for example, that it is not clear what we mean by being a multidisciplinary area: What are the disciplines within our set? Are individuals multidisciplinary, or is it the field, however it is defined, that is multidisciplinary? More specifically, participants from Europe indicated that it is a struggle to define international managerial communication and to differentiate between professional, business, and managerial communication.

What also contributes to our field's lack of a research identity is that we teach and do research in significantly different departments and schools: English, business and management, speech communications, and even information technology. In Europe, the situation is further complicated by the fact that significant business communication research and teaching is done in departments of foreign languages by researchers and teachers versed in second-language acquisition theory and methodology. These different disciplinary homes result in our using theories, frameworks, and information sources that lack significant overlap. This lack of overlap contributes to the shapelessness of our field and makes it difficult for us to define to our stakeholders and ourselves the work we do and the value it provides.

To solve this identity problem, Janis Forman suggested that we need to be aligned with a business function to be seen as important or relevant and to help us find a consistent or definable research voice. Corporate communication is one such function that is becoming increasingly important in business organizations and could provide us with opportunity to define ourselves internally, within the business world, and within the university.

Geoffrey Cross argued that we need a coherent research program or agenda to create a business and managerial communication discipline. Creating that discipline will give us a research identity that will differentiate us from other disciplines, give our journals a clearer sense of focus, and enable our members to speak with a clearer voice about what contributions to communication knowledge and practice we provide. Both Forman's and Cross's suggestions pose major challenges for the discipline.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS WE NEED TO ADDRESS

This lack of certainty about identity was reflected in the panel's and session participants' responses to the kind of research questions we need to address. Panel members' sources and catalysts for their research questions came from individual curiosity, practitioners' needs, our discipline's research needs, and the needs of the international business community.

Daphne Jameson raised a provocative and troubling research issue. She stated that we have been studying communication for decades, and many of the theories we use have existed since Aristotle, yet businesspeople still have difficulty writing effective documents and performing effectively in common on-the-job communication tasks. Why do people have such insurmountable problems applying communication concepts? Implicit in her question is why do dysfunctional communication practices become institutional norms or communication lore in organizations, and what processes and strategies can businesspeople use to make their members aware of effective communication concepts, change their thinking about what constitutes effective communication practice, and develop the skills to use those concepts in their interactions?

Pris Rogers stated that we need frameworks that enable practitioners to see more clearly the organizational communication situations in which they are embedded, including the constraints and opportunities those situations afford, and to analyze those situations more effectively. Although businesspeople often learn through example, that process takes too long, and the learning can be too particularized or incident specific rather than applicable across organizational contexts. In addition, Pris suggested that we need to focus research on communication as part of larger organizational systems and determine the system factors that influence communication activity and the effect that changes in communication practice have on those other systems.

Dorothy Winsor pointed out that virtually every research article has an "implications for future research" section, but we rarely follow up on the questions raised in those sections. If indeed we began to follow up on these questions, we would soon create research programs that develop a coherent body of work that would give us research recognition and an identity.

Gina Poncini discussed the need for research in multicultural and multilingual settings. She asked what kind of communication strategies and skills multinationals need. How does one adapt to and communicate with people who do not have the same linguistic competencies and a similar knowledge base? And perhaps most important, how do national, organizational, and professional cultures and values shape communication thinking and practice, and what strategies can professionals use to negotiate these differences in multicultural settings?

Finally, Janis Forman suggested that the research issues we address are driven by our own curiosity, heightened by our gaps in knowledge. Those gaps are created to some extent by the functional silos (English, management, speech communication, information technology) in which we work. That combination of personal curiosity and gaps in knowledge created (ironically) by our own particular educational backgrounds and the functional areas in which we work makes our research autobiographical: a narrative of what each of us believes we need to know.

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH IDEAS

The panelists and session participants provided far-ranging suggestions about sources for research ideas. Several session participants indicated that we need to go into business organizations and shadow first-line supervisors, midlevel managers, and support staff members to understand communication problems in the context of other organizational processes and systems. To benefit from that experience, we need to understand and speak the language of business, not merely communication. As one session participant pointed out, some of us deride the language of business and have significant reservations about the capitalistic enterprise. A lack of an understanding of business language or a prejudice toward business can shatter our credibility, undermine our ability to listen and learn from businesspeople, and, as a result, distort the information about business communication problems and solutions told to us by practitioners.

Although research using student samples is often maligned, Pris Rogers stated that students, particularly MBA students who have several years of staff or managerial work experience, provide a rich information source for managerial problems. These students' detailed stories about communication successes and failures, particularly if there is a common theme to those experiences, can surface timely research questions. Furthermore, these students can provide entrée into organizations or provide links to others who can provide that entrée, enabling us to go beyond data gathered in the university environment.

Several session participants working in Europe stated that, in addition to drawing research agendas from multicultural and multinational companies, researchers can discover useful and relevant areas to explore by looking outside of business organizations. They indicated that talking to business journalists, attending industry events, and understanding the concerns of groups (e.g., environmental and social justice) critical of business are important sources of research questions.

Finally, several session participants pointed out that our communication research focuses too much on those who have status and power in organizations. Our work also needs to address the less powerful, those whose voices are rarely heard or are muffled, such as hourly employees, temporary workers, and call center employees. The impact of these workers' communication practices is often overlooked, even though they may be the first form of interaction that customers have with an organization.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This session helped remind us of the significant strides that our research has made in the past 20 years in terms of understanding how communication works in business. We are far beyond the rubrics, checklists, and simple statements about communication effectiveness that characterized much of our work in the early to mid-1980s. However, the session made painfully clear that we have significant work ahead of us if our colleagues in related disciplines are to recognize and value our work and, most important, if businesspeople will see the utility of our research and turn to us to help understand and solve their communication problems.

Three modest suggestions came from the session to begin the process of solving this identity and value problem:

1. Write and publish more review articles and meta-analyses to provide us with a research agenda that, if collectively pursued, would help us establish a research identity.
2. Do even more of our research in organizations (action research), share the results with organizational members who have the power and resources to implement recommendations stemming from those results, and serve as ongoing consultants and trainers to help implement the recommendations.
3. Align business communication more clearly with a corporate function such as corporate communication to make clear on a continuous basis that our work has a specific place and hence an identity within business organizations.

To do this work, we need new blood. As several session participants pointed out, our lack of PhD programs makes it difficult to develop the ongoing research talent needed to create the knowledge that will give our field a sense of purpose and recognition. Europe has made a modest start with the small international business communication PhD program at the Helsinki School of Economics. More than likely, though, we will have to do what we have done in the past: attract talented PhDs from other disciplines—English, speech communication, rhetoric, organizational communication—to provide us with new research blood. We can do so only if our field offers compelling research and provides some assurance of an academic identity.

That may be our greatest challenge.

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