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# Approaches to Teaching Organizational Communication

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**A**LTHOUGH the origins of organizational communication can be traced to speech training for executives in the 1920s, the study of organizational communication in departments of speech communication is a relatively new phenomenon, covering little more than five decades. Over the last two decades, however, the growth in the field in respect to courses, programs and research activity has been rapid. Putnam and Cheney (1992) remark that "Most colleges and universities with speech communication programs offer at least one course in this area. A master's degree in organizational communication can be obtained at approximately 75 institutions and 35 of these schools offer the Ph.D." (p. 70). As Putnam and Ford (1990) state, "The pedagogy of organizational communication has evolved into a broad-based cadre of courses that encompasses business and professional speaking, communication training and development, and business writing, as well as the study of communicative behavior in organizations" (p. 155).

When one refers to organizational communication as an area of study in our field, one might be referring to any variety of different courses, topical areas, concentrations or program requirements. As a result, not surprisingly, organizational communication textbooks also reflect a variety of perspectives and pedagogical orientations held by their authors as well as the variety of approaches used in college classrooms across the country.

## FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS IN SELECTING AN APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Hugenberg (1992) identified four problems that make teaching business communication difficult: 1) lack of a shared organizational vision; 2) lack of reality; 3) duration of class; and 4) lack of direction in textbooks. I believe these problems also impact on selection of an instructional approach for the teaching of organizational communication. First, the lack of organizational vision refers to the students' limited and different experiences in organizational settings. It has been suggested that their lack of practical organizational experience often forms the basis for naive expectations and assumptions regarding communication in organizations. Furthermore, students fail to bring to the classroom a common organizational background that can act as a foundation for discussing and understanding the organizational environment. Hugenberg (1992) suggests that it is impossible to create

“real” organizational communication situations in the classroom when students share “no organizational identity, no common organizational background, and no organizational goals” (p. 65). Putnam and Ford (1990) also suggest that “the challenge in teaching organizational communication is finding ways to help students to conceptualize the dynamics and complexities of organizations” (p. 117). Second, there is a lack of reality in the classroom assignments. Students need to be able to link their classroom assignment strategies to the workplace. Without the prerequisite background or experience such a transference cannot take place. Third, a single one-semester or quarter course doesn’t provide sufficient time to develop high levels of communication competence. Nevertheless, Hugenberg (1992) does suggest that students be exposed to a range of communication experiences rather than a limited set of opportunities in such courses. And, fourth, there is a lack of direction in the textbooks. Hugenberg states that:

For the most part, textbooks present too much material; they seek to cover *every* business communication-related topic that ever has been discussed in the course. This leads to another dilemma for the instructor: should the instructor attempt to cover all the topics in the textbook or emphasize only parts of the text that will assist in the establishment of her own idiosyncratic pedagogical objectives? Whatever course the instructor takes, the results are probably pedagogically unsubstantiated and do not assist students in preparing for common communication situations in their careers. (p. 86)

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE?

When selecting an approach to the teaching of organizational communication, the instructor must first determine what purpose(s) or function(s) are served by the course. Historically, organizational communication “grew out of a concern for developing managerial skills, improving the effectiveness of media” (Putnam & Cheney, 1992, p. 88). Many of the early courses in organizational communication had a practical or applied approach, focusing primarily on the development of communication competencies. Students were trained in marketable skills. The pedagogical emphasis was on the development of communication skills applicable to the business workplace. Even today, managerial communication which is taught primarily in business/management departments emphasizes skills over theory (Pace, Michal-Johnson, & Mills, 1990). Perhaps, in part, reflecting the strong liberal arts orientation within our discipline, or recognizing the uniqueness of communication in organizational settings, courses began to evolve which took on a broader approach exploring the nexus between communication theory and organizational theory, including the development of communication skills, but also supplemented by business, technical and/or computer coursework.

Putnam and Ford (1990) identified four instructional approaches to organizational communication depending on the instructional goals. The first approach focuses on managerial communication and communication competencies. The second approach focuses on career training with emphasis on the development of skills needed for training-development and human resource positions in organizations. The third approach focuses more on general understanding of organizational environments and the system of communication as it operates within that context. And the fourth approach takes a process or cultural-rhetorical perspective toward organizations.

They also suggest that although the content and objectives of most organizational communication courses differ, the majority of courses have three instructional goals: 1) organizational awareness; 2) problem awareness; and 3) communication skills. The desired outcome of achieving organizational awareness is student understanding of the ubiquitous nature of communication system, it is asserted that the student can select the appropriate behavior when confronted with a "real" organizational communication problem. The desired outcome of problem awareness is the student's ability to develop problem solving skills which assist in the analysis of complicated communication situations. The student's analysis of the problem forms the basis for planned interactions and the choice of subsequent communication behaviors; it requires the development of perspective taking and interpersonal sensitivity. Finally, the desired outcome of communication skills is the development of the unique communication skills required in the organizational environment.

I would argue that the primary goal in most organizational communication courses at the undergraduate level is actually the development of communication competencies. In suggesting this pedagogical approach, I'm referring to Littlejohn and Jabusch's (1982) four components of communication competency: 1) process understanding; 2) interpersonal sensitivity; 3) communication skills; and 4) ethical responsibility. Process understanding refers to the "cognitive ability to comprehend the elements and dynamics of a communication event" (p. 30). This skill leads to an increased understanding of communication processes. Interpersonal sensitivity refers to one's ability to select appropriate responses and to sense meanings and/or feelings of others in the organization. Communication skills refers to improved abilities in speaking, writing, listening and reading. And, finally, ethical responsibility refers to an attitude of concern for the well-being of other participants and a sense of business ethics. Shockley-Zalabak (1991) patterns her text presentation around such a four-competency framework, knowledge, sensitivity, skills and values. And she suggests that the value component is key to the integration of knowledge, sensitivity and skills.

### **WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSEWORK?**

Pace, Michal-Johnson, and Mills (1990) in a limited survey of communication departments found that 51% of the departments required an organizational communication course as part of the major and 19% of the departments required a course as part of the minor; this reflected an increase of 17% and 8% respectively between their 1983 and 1990 surveys. Furthermore, 56% of the schools offer only a single course in organizational communication primarily at the upper division level.

In a survey of the structure and content of the business communication course, Nelson, Luse, and DuFrene (1992) also found the majority of four-year institutions also require only one course in business communication, although instructors suggest that two courses are needed to develop the required skills. A small number of the business communication courses (5.2%) were taught in speech/communication departments. The business communication course is primarily a theory and letter-writing course whether taught in business or non-business departments. However, business communication courses taught in speech/communication departments spent approximately 40% of the class sessions on oral communication related topics.

Pace et al. (1990) found that the basic course in organizational communication generally uses both written and oral assignments. Eighty percent of their respondents used oral assignments, and 80% used written assignments for assessment purposes. Pace and Ross (1983) found 40% of their respondents used experiential learning exercises with the goal of integrating organizational and communication theory and applying theoretical knowledge to organizational events.

## DELIVERY SYSTEMS

There are a number of teaching strategies used in the teaching of the basic course in organizational communication, ranging from lecture/discussion to experiential learning projects.

Instructors have been particularly sensitive to criticism for the need to connect the classroom to the workplace. Instructional exercises are used to examine the role of human interaction in organizational life. Some of the most frequently used exercise strategies are independent studies, role playing and case studies, simulations, direct observation, video-taping and oral presentations.

Kreps and Lederman (1985) suggest that the case method provides a vehicle for bridging organizational communication theory and organizational life. Case analysis provides the student with experience in "recognizing and systematically diagnosing organizational problems" (p. 363). Mier (1982) identifies three pedagogical benefits of this learning strategy:

1. to help *formulate* key concepts introduced in textbook readings and classroom lectures; for example, role playing, network analysis, serial process, proxemics, organizational game playing, communication climate (textbook cases; cases prepared by the instructor);
2. to help *reinforce* learning through application of key concepts covered in lectures, readings, films and textbook cases (student case studies);
3. to help students *pinpoint* the communication issue as it relates to other organizational contingencies (textbook cases and student cases). (p. 151)

She also suggests that when students prepare their own case studies, the relationship between organizational communication, managerial decisions and organizational life becomes apparent. Schmidt and Lopstreu (1975) identify six benefits derived from the use of the case method:

1. provides a satisfying learning experience which combines realism with participation,
2. bridges the gap between knowledge and skills,
3. provides opportunities for role-playing in which students may see themselves as others see them,
4. provides an opportunity to see the different perspectives held by others and adapt to them,
5. provides an opportunity to view the complexity of the organizational environment, and
6. provides opportunities for social skill development including participation in a group, sensitivity to others' opinions, understanding of others' actions. (p. 2)

Role playing also is used extensively to enact specific organizational situations. While the environment is structured, the interaction between participants is spontaneous. There are three direct benefits (Putnam & Ford, 1990):

1. provides students with the opportunity to practice specific skills not encountered in the classroom,
2. provides a means to demonstrate effective and ineffective communicative behaviors in an organization, and
3. provides a means for focusing on concrete examples of abstract concepts.

Effective role-playing is dependent on the students ability to enact the role appropriately and the instructor's sensitivity in assigning the roles to the appropriate students.

Independent study and/or internship allow the student to gain in-depth knowledge in areas not included in the formal course offerings. The independent study provides a method for conducting research that integrates theory with practical experience in organizational communication (Schuker, Watson, & Lease, 1992). Internships, on the other hand, help to provide work experience, but may not provide classroom related experiences. Interns don't always perceive the connection between application and theoretical principals underlying their decision and experiences.

## CONCLUSION

Organizational communication as an area of study has led to the creation of a range of programs and courses. The basic organizational communication course, like the term itself, has taken on a variety of forms. Pace, Michal-Johnson, and Mills (1990) suggest that the time has come for communication professionals to meet to generate "consensus on what should be included in a universal basic course in organizational communication, leaving some room for local adaptations and variation" (p. 49). The approach(es) that we use to teach organizational communication should be determined by the goals and objectives of the organizational communication course(s) in the program.

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