Introduction to this special issue on communication and instruction beyond the traditional classroom

Deanna Sellnow & Timothy Sellnow

To cite this article: Deanna Sellnow & Timothy Sellnow (2018) Introduction to this special issue on communication and instruction beyond the traditional classroom, Communication Education, 67:4, 409-413, DOI: 10.1080/03634523.2018.1503695

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2018.1503695

Published online: 28 Aug 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1083

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
INTRODUCTION

Introduction to this special issue on communication and instruction beyond the traditional classroom

Deanna Sellnow and Timothy Sellnow

Nicholson School of Communication and Media, University of Central Florida, Orlando, U.S.A.

Most people are familiar with the Chinese proverb, “Give a man [sic] a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime” (Tripp, 1970, p. 76). Those of us studying instructional communication not only concur, but also argue that effective communication is critical to successful teaching and learning in all contexts. Moreover, we assert that many communication initiatives, interventions, and campaigns are destined to fail when the messages do not instruct receivers about how and why to act on the information.

The term instructional communication was originally conceived in the 1970s as a means to distinguish it from communication education, which was broadly defined as instruction in communication (how to teach interpersonal communication, group communication, public communication, etc.). Instructional communication, on the other hand, referred to the role of communication in instruction (Richmond & Frymier, 2010). Scholars believed that conceptualizing instructional communication in this broader context would encourage a wealth of instructional research occurring in a variety of communication contexts (e.g., health, intercultural, interpersonal, family, organizational, political). In fact, Mottet and Beebe (2006) poignantly confirmed that instructional communication research “is not limited to the traditional primary, secondary, and higher education classroom, but can also be applied to non-traditional instructional settings” (p. 5).

Unfortunately, however, our observations over several decades indicate that this did not happen; at least not overtly. Instead, scholars studying the role of communication in instruction in various subfields often coined their own terms. For example, health communication scholars created the term health interventions, organizational communication scholars referred to such instructional research as professional training and development, and public relations scholars adopted the term communication campaigns. Although we cannot be certain as to why scholars in various communication subfields conceived unique terms to define what is essentially instructional communication research, one possible explanation is that we (instructional communication scholars) have not articulated what we mean by instructional communication as clearly as we could. Another is that we have not highlighted the intersections among our shared research goals, methods, and outcome measures as explicitly as we should. What is clear, however, is that the call to expand the scope of instructional communication research beyond traditional classroom contexts has not materialized to the degree instructional communication researchers...
had hoped it would when they first conceived it as distinct from communication education.

Our goal in this special issue is to renew the call for overtly advancing instructional communication scholarship as it occurs across communication contexts. In renewing this call for examining the role of instructional communication across contexts, we join forces with a number of colleagues that are also committed to this cause (e.g., Chory & Horan, 2018; Donovan, Love, Mackert, Vangelisti, & Ring, 2017; Horan & Afifi, 2014; Sellnow et al., 2015; Sellnow & Sellnow, in press; Waldeck & LaBelle, 2016; Sprague, 2002; Valenzano & Wallace, 2017). We hope that by calling attention to the expansive scope of the instructional communication research agenda in this special issue, we will crystallize the role of instructional communication across contexts in ways that entice more scholars to join us in studying the role of communication in instruction beyond traditional classroom settings.

We ground our rationale in a larger argument about the current state of the communication discipline. To clarify, although defining theories and research based on communication contexts served us well when communication was a relatively new discipline seeking to establish ourselves firmly in the academy, continuing to do so may do us more harm than good. That is, we have become unnecessarily fragmented in the silos we have built based on context. We believe the time has come to employ communication theories and methods based on research goals and desired outcomes regardless of context. It seems, for example, that communication scholars study interpersonal communication across contexts and persuasive communication across contexts, among others. We believe, just as many communication subfields are not context dependent, neither should instructional communication be. To clarify, if one’s goal is to examine the role of communication in achieving desired learning outcomes in the workplace, that is instructional communication in an organizational context. If one examines the degree to which doctors’ instructions about postoperative care are followed by patients, that is instructional communication in a healthcare context. If one seeks to develop a warning message that encourages people to take appropriate actions to avoid the perils of a natural disaster, that is instructional communication in a risk and crisis communication context. Thus, the following articles are grounded in the spirit of this stance for moving the field of communication both together and forward (in this case, focused on instructional communication research in particular) in the years to come.

This special issue consists of two research articles, four agenda-setting pieces, and three expert responses designed to encourage readers to think outside the box of instructional communication only as it occurs in traditional classrooms. The first research article, “Teaching advocacy communication to pediatric residents: the efficacy of applied improvisation as a training tool,” by Krista Hoffmann-Longtin and colleagues explores the utility of using applied improvisational theater as an instructional method for teaching pediatric residents how to communicate effectively with worried and confused patients and their families. In learning these important skills, healthcare practitioners have the potential to reclaim themselves as trusted experts that can help clients make meaning of health information they receive from the Internet and other information sources. The article clearly demonstrates the value of examining instructional practices as they influence learning in a health communication context.
The second research article, “Spewing nonsense [or not]: communication competence and socialization in optics and photonics workplaces,” by Kelly Norris Martin and colleagues, examines how professionals in the optics and photonics industry are socialized to enact the norms of effective communication in their workplaces. Through a qualitative analysis of 33 interviews with employees from 15 different optics and photonics companies, they revealed five primary themes regarding effective communication norms and expectations: proactive questioning, efficient decision making, familial-like humor, tactful translation, and fluent modality switching. Ultimately, they argue that communication competence requires cross-occupational communication that can be taught via systematic and intentional communication in the disciplines instruction. As such, this article makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of instructional communication in an organizational communication context.

The first of the agenda-setting manuscripts, “Fake news, phishing, and fraud: a call for research on digital media literacy education outside the classroom,” by Nicole Lee and Will Ryan points to recent and growing trends to spread false online news and fraud. They respond to this extensive distortion and deception with a call for teaching digital media literacy to adults generally and to older adults specifically to teach them the skills required to evaluate the information and sources they discover online, manage private personal information when participating in social media environments, and avoid falling victim to cybercrimes targeting them. They rightly point out that most digital media literacy instruction targets children, adolescents, and college students; however, more instructional training and research ought to focus on programs tailored to nondigital natives. This need is particularly pressing given that polls conducted as recently as 2016 indicate that more cybercrimes are committed against people 60 years old and older than any other age group (FBI, 2017). They propose several avenues to fill these gaps in instructional research and teaching about digital media literacy beyond traditional classroom walls. Doing so would make an important contribution to the scholarly conversation about communication in digital media literacy instruction.

In her article, “A new research agenda: instructional practices of activists mobilizing for science,” Meghnaa Tallapragada proposes a related research agenda to address the growing concern over fake news and alternative facts that attempt to debunk the credibility of science. At the core of her agenda, Tallapragada contends that instructional communication and research can help science advocates make science knowledge accessible to diverse publics and to policy makers and, in doing so, refute false information with evidence-based scientific facts. For example, research could explore how scientists explain science to nonscientists and both groups could work together to cocreate shared understanding. Research could also examine the degree to which mobilization influences not only science literacy but also attitudes toward science, as well as the effects of various compliance-gaining strategies used by activists to mobilize others to join the cause. Ultimately, her article makes a strong case for instructional communication and research in science communication contexts.

In their article, “I, teacher: using artificial intelligence (AI) and social robots in communication and instruction,” Chad Edwards, Autumn Edwards, and Patric Spence focus on the compelling need for more research deconstructing the pros and cons of using AI and social robots, as well as how they might be used collaboratively to enhance teaching and learning practices of instructors rather than replace them.
In essence, they argue that human–machine communication (HMC) has found its way into educational contexts, both within and beyond traditional classroom walls, and its use is likely to grow. Thus, they confirm arguments made by Kaufmann and Tatum (2017) that the time is ripe for replicative instructional research that explores how a variety of human-to-human constructs such as teacher immediacy, credibility, clarity, and humor play out when the instructional interactions take place instead between humans and machines. They aptly conclude that the need for research examining HMC in instructional contexts both within and beyond traditional classrooms will continue to grow. The time to begin that scholarly exchange is now. Instructional research has much to contribute to the relatively new context of human–machine communication.

Sean Horan and Courtney Wright call for expanding instructional research to explore its role in shedding new light on socially relevant issues in their article, “Bridging campus and community: religion and violence as expansive and socially relevant communication research.” The two specific areas they focus on are the role of communication and instruction in mitigating socially relevant issues surrounding religion and violence. Essentially, they advise instructional communication scholars to tackle these issues by exploring how external factors, diverse identities, and relational dynamics influence communication, teaching, and learning around religion and violence. They contend that it is both our responsibility and obligation to do so, in part, because by not doing so we make room for pseudocommunication experts to offer misguided instruction and training. Communication scholars must be the go-to sources for evidence-based teaching and learning not only in the academy but in the communities within which we live. Ultimately, their article makes a strong case for extending the boundaries of instructional research to explore the publics’ understanding of and related actions taken in response to socially relevant issues occurring in religious communication contexts, as well as on those focused on violence.

Finally, we include forward-thinking responses from three experts with primary research foci in intercultural (Carolyn Calloway-Thomas), risk and crisis (Matthew Seeger), and health (Theresa Thompson). Each of them considers the articles presented here, as well as their own research agendas in ways that suggest future avenues for research in instructional communication beyond traditional classrooms walls. We intentionally selected respondents that do not consider instructional communication to be part of their primary personal research agenda or necessarily even a focus within their primary communication research subfields. Our reasons for doing so are twofold. First, we hope their comments will help illuminate what scholars in other communication subfields perceive instructional communication and research to be. As such, their comments may point to additional research and dialogue we ought to engage in to help our communication colleagues understand instructional communication as we intend it. Second, we hope they will bring ideas for future instructional communication research situated in their subfields back to their colleagues and, in doing so, contribute to achieving our goal of expanding the scope of instructional communication research beyond traditional classroom contexts.

In sum, we hope that these articles taken together spur the thinking of our readers regarding ways they might integrate instructional communication research into their future work. As such, we hope to engage in fruitful scholarly discussions about the role and value of instructional research in a variety of contexts both within and beyond...
traditional classroom walls. Such a renewed dedication to instructional communication research in all contexts has the potential to address important communication challenges in an ever-evolving world where the communication landscape is continuously shifting.

References


