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## The Internal Marginalization of Basic Course Scholarship

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*The Forum*

**The Internal Marginalization  
of Basic Course Scholarship**

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There is an adage in the field of communication education that states, the difference between knowing and teaching is communication (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978). That is, a teacher can be an expert in his or her field, but if he or she cannot communicate that knowledge in a way that students understand, learning is not achieved. This statement highlights the central role of communication in the teaching and learning process. As communication education scholars and Basic Course Directors, we conduct research in the domains of communication pedagogy (i.e., research questions that address the best methods of teaching communication) and instructional communication (i.e., research questions that explore the relationships between teacher communication variables and student learning). In doing so, we have always found ourselves in the fortunate position of conducting research on the thing that we practice every day—teaching and teacher training. More specifically, our teaching and training yields fertile ground for research, and our research serves to guide our teaching and training practices. From this perspective, instruction and pedagogy are integrally linked. Many of the basic communication course scholars and

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directors that we have worked with over the last 20+ years subscribe to this position.

While this relationship seems mutually reciprocal to us, some scholars in the discipline have worked to promote instructional communication in ways that marginalize communication pedagogy scholarship. In fact, some of these scholars argue that instructional communication should not be included under the umbrella of communication education at all. We argue that one of the most significant threats facing the basic communication course is the ongoing confusion about how scholars define “communication education.” As we will show, these definitional distinctions are critical as they lead to scholarly practices (e.g., opportunities for publishing manuscripts in our disciplinary journals) that privilege instructional communication scholarship and marginalize communication pedagogy scholarship. This approach ultimately places both domains in a precarious and unsustainable position.

## **INTERNAL THREATS TO BASIC COURSE SCHOLARSHIP**

We begin with the realization that scholars in various domains of communication education have been working at cross-purposes in advancing the field within the discipline. Specifically, concerns of definitional distinctions cause confusion, and claims about scholarship serve to create a climate of competition, rather than collaboration. We need to focus on where each domain can inform the other and value the unique contributions that each has to offer, particularly for basic course practitioners.

The debate concerning the appropriate domains of communication education is certainly not new. For example, Friedrich (1987, 1989) argued that communication education comprises three domains, including communication instruction (studying ways to improve communication competencies), communication development (studying the acquisition of communication skills), and instructional communication (studying communicative factors involved in teaching and learning). While Friedrich (1989) attempted to chart the boundaries of the overlapping and interconnected domains of the discipline, other scholars sought to delineate and separate these scholarly pursuits into mutually exclusive categories. For example, Sorensen and Christophel (1992) advanced the claim that instructional communication and communication education “constitute opposite ends of an intellectual continuum” (p. 36).<sup>1</sup>

In making the distinction between instructional communication and communication instruction/education research (of which, work on the basic course is included), Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax (2001) argue that communication education scholars are essentially a theoretical in their concern for content-specific pedagogy. In contrast, they assert that instructional communication scholars work deductively from theoretical perspectives or inductively to build theory. Waldeck et al. (2001) contend that during the 1990s 47% of scholarship in *Communication Education* was instruc-

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<sup>1</sup> Note that Sorensen and Christophel use communication education to refer to communication pedagogy; whereas, Friedrich uses communication education as an umbrella term that comprises instructional communication, communication pedagogy, and developmental communication

tional. Waldeck et al. (2001) further rebuke the communication education label by asserting that there appears to be “a prevailing tendency among scholars to categorize all education-related research as communication or speech education” (Waldeck et al., 2001, p. 225). In other words, instructional communication research is separate from and should not be included under the communication education umbrella.

These definitional distinctions have important implications for scholarship related to the basic course. In their attempt to distinguish between instructional communication and communication education, instructional communication scholars have unwittingly created a false dichotomy. Indeed, Waldeck et al. (2001) use this dichotomy to argue that *Communication Education*, a journal that once welcomed communication pedagogy scholarship, should be renamed *Instructional Communication* because the scholarship within the journal transcends pedagogy. However, if we use Friedrich’s conceptualization of communication education as a field comprising both domains of communication instruction (pedagogy) and instructional communication, the journal is aptly titled and should contain scholarship from all three domains (including communication development).

Even though the name of the journal didn’t change, the type of scholarship within the journal did and tended to favor empirical research from an instructional perspective.

As evidence, Simonds and Valenzano (in press) conducted an analysis of the research highlighted in Staton-Spicer and Wulff’s (1984) synthesis of research in communication and instruction. They were only able

to identify 10 basic course articles appearing in *Communication Education* from 1974-1982. Additionally, they found that since the Staton-Spicer and Wulff (1984) synthesis, only 10% of the empirical articles published in *Communication Education* were related to the basic course. Moreover, of that ten percent, 71% of those articles focused on communication apprehension in the context of public speaking (e.g., Ayres & Hopf, 1985; Beatty, 1988; Behnke & Sawyer, 1999; Hinton & Kramer, 1998). Thus, the view that these domains are dichotomous and mutually exclusive has had the effect of edging communication pedagogy out of the scope of *Communication Education* and this led scholars to pursue new outlets for their research.

In the late 1980s, several basic course directors at the Midwest Basic Course Director's Conference (now the Basic Course Director's Conference) began discussing the lack of publishing opportunities for basic course scholarship. A chief concern of this group was that the dearth of journals publishing basic course scholarship could put basic course directors at-risk in the tenure and promotion process. Additionally, they wanted to preserve some of the insightful conversations about best practices in administration, training, course development, research, and assessment that were taking place at the conference (Wallace, 1989). This conversation ultimately led to the creation of the *Basic Communication Course Annual* and the first volume of the *BCCA* appeared in 1989. While the journal began with several forum issues, best practices, and the dissemination of award winning papers from regional and national conferences, the *BCCA* now boasts research that is much more empirical, programmatic, and theoretical.

The *BCCA* is an outstanding journal that has served basic course scholars well. A look at just the last 10 years reveals that the *BCCA* has consistently demonstrated a commitment to theory driven research in the basic course. In fact, in a cursory analysis of the titles and abstracts of manuscripts published in the *BCCA*, 78% (N=56 of 72) of the articles were empirical in nature and 36% (N=20) of those empirical articles explicitly mention being driven by theory (Simonds & Valenzano, in press). The recent research published in the *BCCA* stands in stark contrast to the assertion of scholars like Waldeck, et al. (2001) that this work is largely atheoretical.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

We have made the case that the field of communication education should be conceptualized as containing two complimentary and mutually reinforcing domains: communication pedagogy and instructional communication. It is clear that efforts to compartmentalize these areas of study in the past have not served our discipline well, especially for those interested in communication pedagogy. Basic course practitioners certainly stand to benefit from the scholarship of communication pedagogy as it informs us of the best practices in designing courses to address communication knowledge, skills, and outcomes. Additionally, we benefit from instructional communication research as it focuses on the communication skills that all teachers need, regardless of the subject they teach, to interact competently in the classroom. As such, this research informs our teacher training and development programs. Nowhere is the

complimentary nature of these domains more evident than in the role of the basic course director.

The definitional debate that we have outlined in this article poses a clear and present danger to the basic course. Adapting a restrictive and competitive approach to communication education limits opportunities for publishing scholarship, which has implications for the tenure and promotion process. Given the importance of the basic course to the discipline and its departments on a number of campuses, it is essential to continue to develop and provide opportunities for peer-reviewed scholarship on the basic course. The outlets discussed in this essay already benefit the discipline at large, but by advancing a definition of communication education that includes both pedagogy and instruction we can provide even more information for maintaining and developing sustainable basic course programs around the globe. There is some reason to be optimistic about expanding opportunities for publishing basic communication course research as two recent editors of *Communication Education*, Paul Witt and Jonathan Hess, have issued calls for manuscripts that soften the boundaries and include research on basic course assessment. Also, the *BCCA's* forum section provides scholars with the opportunity to address some of the most pressing issues facing the basic course. These opportunities are critical to sustain and advance communication pedagogy scholarship and the faculty that conduct such research.

Finally, we would be remiss if we neglected to mention the larger implications of this threat for training future Basic Course Directors. The debate over the definition of communication education has spilled over into doctoral programs in communication threatening our

ability to produce competent Basic Course Directors. In the last several years, doctoral programs that address any of the domains of communication education have dwindled. Additionally, there has never been a doctoral program specifically designed to train basic course directors. There is little opportunity to nurture a pipeline of future basic course or instructional communication scholars because of this paucity of doctoral programs. This puts both domains of communication education at-risk—the fate of instructional communication and communication pedagogy scholars are intimately associated especially as they inform the duties and responsibilities of a basic course director. Realizing this fact and accepting a more unifying definition of communication education could therefore go a long way to ensuring a bright future for all communication educators.

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