



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive
DSpace Repository

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

1993

Response to Mohan Limaye: The Need for Contextually Based Research

Suchan, Jim

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

<https://hdl.handle.net/10945/35060>

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

Response to Mohan Limaye: The Need for Contextually Based Research

Jim Suchan
The Naval Postgraduate School

I am pleased my response to Larry Smeltzer's article on the state of business communication research has compelled my friend and colleague to write an extensive reply. I agree with Professor Limaye that we need an ongoing dialogue as to what constitutes sound research. However, I disagree with Professor Limaye's "deconstruction" of my comments about *JBC* research, his views about the difference between basic and applied research, and his perception of the differences between business and academia.

Professor Limaye misinterprets my position. He claims I am advocating a de-emphasis of theory-oriented, conceptual research and championing practical, practitioner-oriented scholarship. I do not see research as being *either* theoretical *or* applied; consequently, I am not privileging applied research over basic research. I do see research as a continuum where researchers strategically choose research frameworks and methodologies to answer a research question that has value to *both* the academic and business community. If researchers do this, they are in my estimation conducting relevant, significant research.

What I am advocating is an increase in *contextually based* business communication research that, as I state in my response to Smeltzer, "integrates knowledge and practice" so we can better "connect the research we produce with practitioners' needs." I believe this type of research will have value to both the academic and business communities. Unfortunately, most *JBC* research has not been managerially or even business-context based. Much of the work is based on survey data, student respondents, or theoretical frameworks that are not closely connected to business or managerial contexts. Even the conceptual research *JBC* has published has not systematically "boundary spanned" with other managerial disciplines so that we can take new theoretical frameworks into the field.

I still believe much research published in *JBC* is irrelevant because it is acontextual, that is neither practically or theoretically rooted in situated business or managerial practice. In other words, this work has not increased our knowledge of communication practices within organizations. Furthermore, the reasons I stated, particularly our lack of knowledge about management as a discipline and our unawareness of the

factors that shape communication in organizations, cause us to do inconsequential research. Professor Limaye has not challenged these reasons.

Unwittingly, though, Professor Limaye has provided two other reasons for this lack of relevance: the way we conceptualize research and our perception of the relationship between academia and business organizations.

Professor Limaye has misinterpreted my comments because of the way he frames research. Limaye approaches research from an either/or framework. He makes rigid distinctions between basic research ("the scholarship of discovery"), which he claims is theoretical-conceptual, and applied research (the "scholarship of application"), which to him has commercial applications.

Professor Limaye's framework dislocates the close connection between situated practice and the generation of theory, and it privileges his perception of basic research—"it must be stressed that theory building and the generation of conceptual models . . . come first"—at the expense of other less positivistic research methodologies. More specifically, Limaye's framework undercuts the important work of case researchers, action researchers, ethnographers, and even critical theorists who allow field experience and field data to not only generate theory but also to enable organizational members to learn about themselves and their organizations through research fed back to the organization. This is precisely the type of contextually based business and managerial communication research that can be of value to both academics and practitioners. However, since this research foregrounds communication practice and backgrounds theory, Professor Limaye seems to classify it as merely applied research that should be addressed secondarily by researchers.

Ironically, the evidence that Professor Limaye provides to support his claims about the importance of basic research actually undermines his position. Limaye states that "all the relevant advice given by communication consultants . . . to business practitioners regarding . . . writing would not exist but for the basic research done in the cognitive sciences like psycholinguistics, speech act theory and pragmatics, rhetoric and composition, and human communication" and that "practitioners find useful (these writing tips)." However, he fails to acknowledge consultants' findings that most practitioners never incorporate these "tips" into their writing habits because the tips often violate organizational language norms. We do know a lot about the stylistic, organizational, and document design features that make a document readable, but we know very little about why people in organizations write the way that they do, why they

often reject our theory-based advice about writing, and how we can help create changes in language norms within an organization. In short, basic research stripped of contextual application has not improved writing in organizations.

To be effective, our written communication research should examine how written communication policy is formulated within organizations; how an organization's language norms develop and evolve; the impact that structure, power, communication climate, and behavior controls have on organizational members' writing habits; and a range of other issues. This research can only be conducted within organizations using research methodologies such as case analysis, participant observation, protocol analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, these research methodologies may alter our mechanistic, efficiency driven view of writing effectiveness within organizations. Unfortunately, Professor Limaye's research framework gives this type of work secondary status.

Just as Professor Limaye polarizes research into basic and applied, he also polarizes businesspeople and academics into rigid categories. He claims businesspeople are "preoccupied. . . with profits, market share, and operational efficiency," while academics serve the academy. Furthermore, he believes that the differences between businesspeople and academics, as he constructs these groups' goals, should not be worrisome. I strongly disagree.

We need to work hard to mitigate these perceptual differences if we are to be relevant and do relevant research. Furthermore, we need to reexamine our stereotypes about businesspeople and organizations that cause us to believe businesspeople are only concerned with accumulating wealth and academics are primarily concerned with "truth" as manifested in theory and models. Indeed businesses are often exemplary corporate citizens, and many business organizations are sincerely concerned with the ongoing personal and professional development of their members.

As I stated in my response to Smeltzer, business schools are primarily professional schools that educate students to lead and manage public and private sector enterprises. Because we are primarily professional schools, businesspeople are one of our primary stakeholders. Consequently, it is imperative that we know what occurs in these organizations so we can conduct research that has value to our professional communities as well as businesspeople and students.

If we primarily serve the academy and write in the exclusionist language of our discipline because we believe, as Professor Limaye states, fellow researchers are our primary stakeholders, we ignore a major stakeholder's (businesspeople) needs. This ignorance is politically naive.

The price of this naivety may be loss of uniqueness and relevance that we gain precisely because of our research and teaching's close connection to the communication practices that actually occur within organizations. If we no longer are perceived as unique, we may find our courses canceled and faculty positions removed because, unlike our colleagues in other business school departments, we have failed to be responsive to our customers' needs.

We also need to narrow the gap between business and academia because business organizations sponsor a significant amount of the research at large, research-oriented universities. Business organizations do not, as Professor Limaye argues, merely donate a few computers, build and equip a classroom, and establish a few endowed chairs. For example, at the Naval Postgraduate School's Administrative Sciences Department, public sector research sponsors pay faculty (salaries, travel, equipment, support staff, overhead, etc.) almost \$5 million per year to do a wide range of research. This close connection between "business sponsors" and faculty provides faculty with access to complex, dynamic organizations where they can gather qualitative and quantitative data and furnishes research sponsors with timely solutions to pressing organizational problems. Faculty are often able to translate their sponsor research reports into refereed journal articles that appear in high-quality journals. Furthermore, faculty can bring the knowledge they've gained from the field into the classroom so as to provide students with timely, accurate depictions of the kinds of organizational challenges they will all-too-soon face.

I suspect that Professor Limaye's views about research and the relationship between business and academia represent those of a sizeable number of *JBC* members. However, I am fearful that this approach toward research and attitude toward business will result in research that academics and promotion and tenure committees find intellectually challenging but businesspeople see little value in. More importantly, the kind of research that Professor Limaye's research framework privileges will make it difficult for us understand the current and changing communication practices within organizations because "getting in deep" into organizations to understand how practitioners actually communicate within complex organizational constraints is seen as *secondary* to basic research. If we do not make understanding businesspeople's communication environments one of our primary tasks, we may find ourselves with more time on our hands than we care to have.