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GUEST EDITORIAL: THEORY BUILDING AND RELEVANCE

In the summer of 1989, we proposed a special issue of *The Journal of Business Communication*. The issue's goal was to summarize the literature in several areas of business communication as well as generate research topics and questions that will be important in the next decade. Another goal, and perhaps a more important one, was to furnish several models or conceptual frameworks that will provide business communication researchers with some underpinning for their work. In trying to realize these goals, an important factor drove our decisions about the type of manuscripts we hoped to receive and the expectations we had for this special issue: an appreciation for theory and relevance. This discussion explains why we used theory and relevance as criteria for this special issue and what we hoped to achieve in doing so.

THEORY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

As an academic discipline, business communication has grown tremendously during the past several decades. More academics and practitioners attend our yearly international conference, and membership in the Association for Business Communication has steadily increased. Despite this steady growth, the discipline has not attained the respect or recognition of other business disciplines such as financial management or marketing. Several reasons could account for this lower respect or recognition: the lack of Ph.D. programs in business communication, the skills orientation of many of its courses, the continued association of business communication with Business English or secretarial sciences, and the numerous academic homes in which business communication resides. But we contend that the most important reason for this relative lack of respect is the field's failure to develop a recognizable body of knowledge or a theoretical framework it can identify as its own.

Business communication research continues to represent a pastiche of theoretical perspectives borrowed from organizational behavior, speech communication, rhetoric, composition, organizational communication, marketing, international business, and a number of other areas. Leaders in the discipline have noted that extreme fragmentation rather than integration characterizes the discipline (Lewis, 1985; Wilkinson, 1984). Although this diversity allows for cross-fertilization of ideas, there is urgent need for research that creates a recognizable

theoretical framework that can be identified with business communication.

Theory building is important for several reasons. First, it guides subsequent research. Critics frequently fault researchers for concentrating on data gathering in the absence of articulated theories. A theoretical framework is essential in order to integrate research results involving numerous and often disparate variables. At the Association for Business Communication meetings we present our research on topics such as effective writing strategies, listening, oral communication, and intercultural communication. Unfortunately, researchers find it difficult to integrate their work with others working in similar areas because wittingly or unwittingly we fail to articulate the communication perspectives and related theoretical assumptions that underlie our research work. Without understanding each other's theoretical predisposition, we will continue to collect data that cannot be integrated into a more coherent body of knowledge.

For example, researchers generally have one of four communication perspectives: the mechanistic, psychological, interpretive-symbolic, or systems interaction (Krone, Jablin, & Putnam, 1987). Articulation of the theoretical perspective allows for comparisons understanding of the theoretical assumptions and comparisons with similar research.

A second reason for theory is that it helps new professors more systematically develop their scholarly insights. As Kaplan (1964) mentions, to engage in theorizing means not just to learn by experience but to consider what there is to be learned. We learn more *by* our experience than *from* that of others; to learn from others' experiences can provide only vicarious experience which one has not actually undergone. Only when the students of a discipline can understand the difference between the symbolic dimension of experience as opposed to the apprehension of brute fact can they approach organizational problem solving analytically and creatively.

A third reason we believe theory building is important is that it gives an area an identity, an identifiable body of knowledge that is associated with that area. This identity enables scholars from other areas to assess the quality of research associated with business communication and, in essence, for business communication to pass a large scale peer review. Peer recognition is a major concern to the leaders of the Association for Business Communication. To quote the editors of this journal in 1989, "We intend to publish business communication research which (especially when it relates to other academic disciplines) is respectable in the eyes of academic colleagues."

Theoretically based research is necessary to gain peer respect. Daft (1984) designed a study to determine what is perceived as "not-so-significant" research. He found that a common theme was that the researcher had not thought through complex theoretical issues. He goes on to argue that theoretical development requires extensive intellectual effort. Such development may be especially difficult in business communication because it requires the integration and synthesis of knowledge from a variety of areas. Without this synthesis, the research may be completed easily and quickly, but the results may often be of limited values and be perceived by other academics as being obvious and insignificant.

To build and assess a theoretical knowledge base is a slow incremental process. But this process is necessary if the business communication area is to have the same respect as other business disciplines.

We believe the first two articles in this issue represent an extensive intellectual effort that continues the incremental development of business communication theory. The first article by Annette Shelby, "Applying the Strategic Choice Model to Motivational Appeals: A Theoretical Approach," enhances her earlier theoretical work of integrating contemporary persuasion theory into the business communication literature. In this current journal article, she develops the concept of strategic choice making and applies it to a common business occurrence: the motivational appeal. Shelby does not apply the theoretical perspective to any particular communication media such as written, face-to-face oral or group settings, the theory could be applied to virtually any business communication media. We believe this article will be helpful in guiding future research projects.

The second article presents a theoretical perspective, a competing values framework, that has been previously published and tested in the management literature. But Robert Quinn, Herbert Hildebrandt, Priscilla Rogers and Michael Thompson apply this framework to a specialized situation, presentational communication. In their article, "A Competing Values Framework for Analyzing Presentational Communication in Management Contexts," they provide an example of how a general theory of organizational behavior can be applied to business communication. But this theoretical perspective could be applied to many other variables, such as perceived written communication effectiveness, within the domain of business communication. Again, we believe this theory can be used to integrate and guide future research.

RELEVANCE

Our second goal was to provide a systematic set of research questions or hypotheses that addresses relevant organizational problems of the 1990s. The need for academics to provide research relevant to practitioners is particularly compelling given the finding of one study that less than 15 percent of the managers surveyed read academically produced research (Porter & McKibbin, 1988). This report appeared shortly after our own membership challenged the relevance of our work in business communication (Daniel, 1983).

What is relevant in business communication research? This question is open for debate — every academician believes his or her research is relevant. We do not believe that the best relevancy test is to find a question that has not been addressed in the academic literature and attempt to answer it. Rather it is important to look at current trends and predict future ones. For instance, little doubt exists that an important current business event is the increased need for responsiveness to external environments. This generally requires organizational realignments and improved efficiencies. As a result, greater emphasis is being placed on the power of the team or group. It is now common to hear about project management teams, product enhancement teams, and quality management boards to name just a few. In addition, these significant changes in organizational structure alter communication patterns and affect the way communication products are created.

Collaborative writing is a business communication phenomenon that in all probability will become more and more pervasive in the 1990s in an effort to increase team productivity. Although collaborative writing has been a research concern in the composition field for several years, the business communication discipline has just recently started examining the research question associated with this important area. Janis Forman, in her article, "Collaborative Business Writing: A Burkean Perspective for Future Research," presents a research agenda based on the writing *act*, the participating *agents* and the organizational *scene*. Relevancy of this discussion is enhanced as she addresses such issues as MIS policy as well as ethnicity, gender and race within the group. In addition to reviewing a relevant topic for business communication scholars, Forman presents a theoretical framework for future research.

Cultural diversity is a common phrase when discussing business dynamics in the 1990s. The "Mommy Track" has recently received extensive attention as has the fact that white males may become the minority in business organizations. Extensive research has looked at gender differences in business communication; however, to remain

relevant, research must move further. Marlene Fine presents a research framework that is based on two core processes: (a) resisting privileged discourse, and (b) creating harmonic discourse. She argues that the model she presents in the article, "New Voices in the Workplace: Research Directions in Multicultural Communication," provides a heuristic for those who want to see their research make a difference in organizational dynamics.

The rise of the European Economic Community and Europe 1992, the steady increase in the number of multi-national corporations, the greater number of partnership relationships between American and International Corporations—each of these has made knowledge about intercultural communication issues a commodity that pays immediate dividends to organizations. Furthermore, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has stated that business academicians must emphasize international topics in their research and teaching. Although papers on intercultural communication issues seem to have increased exponentially in the last several years, particularly at ABC meetings, intercultural business communication remains ill-defined and somewhat nebulous.

Mohan Limaye and David Victor, in "Cross-Cultural Business Communication Research: State of the Art and Research Agenda for the 1990s," compare the traditional, linear mode of management thinking in the Western World to other models, in particular the mosaic model. Based on their comparison of the models, they present ten hypotheses that deserve research attention.

We are confident that each of these articles presents a theoretical relevance to business communication that will provide a foundation for future research in our discipline.

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The Association for Business Communication (ABC) seeks nominations for its annual Alpha Kappa Psi Foundation Award for Distinguished Publication on Business Communication. A certificate and a monetary award will be presented at the ABC International Convention in Hawaii in November, 1991.

The article or essay must meet the following criteria: (1) contribute significantly to scholarship, research, and/or pedagogy; (2) demonstrate originality of thought and careful investigation; (3) be extremely well written, lucid, and engaging; (4) have been published in 1990; and (5) have been written by a person who is a member of the ABC when the article is submitted.

Rules for submissions and nominations are:

Entries for the award may be submitted by the author or by a nominator.

Four good-quality photocopies or reprints of the article or essay must be submitted at the time of the nomination.

Entries must be received on or before August 31, 1991.

Please mail entries to: Professor William C. Sharbrough, Chair, ABC Publications Board, Department of Business Administration, The Citadel, Charleston, SC 29409. Phone enquiries concerning the award should dial (803) 792-5056.

The Award for Distinguished Publication will be given annually unless the review committee finds no article or essay worthy of the award in a given year, in which case no award will be presented that year. The monetary award is \$500.

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