

Chapter 12

Moving From Practical Application to Expert Craft Practice in Organizational Communication: A Review of the Past and OPPT– ing Into the Future

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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews practical application activities performed in the field of organizational communication and poses an alternative approach for creating organizations and employees that flourish and can meet the demands of tomorrow. Much of the discipline's practical application efforts have been focused on analyzing problems and focusing on epistemological and conceptual issues—activities that have been appropriate for creating communication competence, but have fallen short in motivating higher levels of proficiency and expertise. This essay creates a case for how the field might valuably move toward other ways of creating transformed practice not through application of organizational communication knowledge, but via an approach that incorporates practical wisdom, critical self-reflexivity, appreciative inquiry, improvisation, sensemaking/breaking/giving and craft practice.

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INTRODUCTION

The type of knowledge that... students do not get exposed to is of a very special kind. It is a practical kind of knowledge, similar to the kind of knowledge you need to have in order to be able to ride a bike or swim. Note also that what is involved is also a personal kind of knowledge, in that it can only be acquired by the individual who actually does the biking or the swimming (Swedberg, 2016, p. 8).

This essay reviews practical application activities performed in organizational communication and poses an alternative approach for creating organizations and employees that flourish and can meet the demands of tomorrow. Much of the discipline's practical application efforts have been focused on analyzing problems and focusing on epistemological and conceptual issues—activities that have been appropriate for creating communication competence, but have fallen short in motivating higher levels of proficiency and expertise. This essay creates a case for how the field might valuably move toward other ways of creating transformed practice not through application of organizational communication knowledge, but via an approach that incorporates practical wisdom, critical self-reflexivity, appreciative inquiry, improvisation, sensemaking/breaking/giving and craft practice. Before extending and looking toward the future, it first makes sense to review where organizational communication has traveled in the past via practical application.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: A REVIEW OF THE PAST

As synthesized by Tracy (2017), organizational communication has a long and close relationship with practical application. This work can be seen in the discipline's translational and engaged scholarship, consulting activities, leadership on applied grant projects, and consistent focus on practical change and solving problems in teaching and research.

The seeds of organizational communication can be traced to practical application as related to management. Organizational communication scholar-consultants led the "International Communication Association communication audit"—an effort that focused on assisting organizations "prevent major breakdowns that limit overall effectiveness" (Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1977, p. 41). The audit was performed with upwards of 20 organizations using survey responses from over 8000 people. Despite this prolific activity, the audit was largely viewed by those outside the effort as managerialist and atheoretical in nature. Since that time, organizational communication scholars have developed alternate audits. For example, Scott, Shaw, Timmerman, Volker, and Quinn (1999) offer a "compelling example of how to use organizational communication audits to teach students and employees important principles and ideas concerning organizational communication" (Barge & Little, 2002, p. 256).

Over the last forty years, the field has expanded its practical activities as demonstrated in a variety of ways:

- Organizational communication scholars have coordinated special forums on "translation," "application," and "public scholarship" (e.g., Ashcraft, 2002; Barge, 2001; Cheney, Wilhelmasson, & Zorn, 2002; Rush & Tracy, 2010; Tracy, 2007).

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