

## Interpersonal communication research in instructional contexts: a dyadic approach

Alan K. Goodboy & Deborah A. Kashy

**To cite this article:** Alan K. Goodboy & Deborah A. Kashy (2017) Interpersonal communication research in instructional contexts: a dyadic approach, *Communication Education*, 66:1, 113-115, DOI: [10.1080/03634523.2016.1221515](https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1221515)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1221515>



Published online: 25 Nov 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 9



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## FORUM: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN INSTRUCTIONAL SETTINGS

### Editors' Introduction

Jon A. Hess<sup>a</sup> and Joseph P. Mazer<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Dayton, Dayton, OH, USA; <sup>b</sup>Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA

From the field's inception, instructional communication researchers have shown interest in interpersonal communication in the classroom. Some of the research has investigated interpersonal relationships as an interesting element of the educational environment, such as studies examining mentoring relationships, power, or identity negotiation in the classroom. Other research has explored how interpersonal dynamics interface with educational outcomes, such as the efforts to connect immediacy or face threat mitigation with motivation, learning, or students' acceptance of feedback. Learning takes place in a relationally negotiated environment with the instructor and other students. Understanding the emotional and relational aspects of classroom communication is critical for those investigating communication's role in optimal student learning. Thus, our field's attention to interpersonal aspects of instructional communication is one of its strengths.

But the decision to select certain topics or frame a study in one way also can obscure other potentially heuristic ways to examine those phenomena. Our field's substantial focus on interpersonal communication means that other frames for understanding communication and learning often receive less attention. Some topics less represented are in areas teaching assistants and other new instructors we work with question most: What is learning, and how can I create lessons that help students achieve it? How do I get students to think more critically? How do I hold students' attention, especially when I have to compete with their smartphone activity in class? How do I lead a discussion effectively? When talking to the class, should I conceal or reveal my ethical, social, and political views; and how does this choice impact educational outcomes? How do I create long-term impact on students and their learning, not just short-term retention? How do I know when to switch among modes of instructional communication (e.g., lecture, discussion, or facilitating activities)? How can I help my students activate connections between what they learn in my class and what they do in their communities, workplaces, and social encounters? And the list goes on.

This forum does not ask whether the study of interpersonal dynamics in instructional communication is worthwhile. As indicated at the outset, its value is beyond question. Rather, we ask whether and where the focus on interpersonal explanations for instructional phenomena may have led us to overlook other potentially rich frames to expose,

explain, and examine issues important to advancing theory and praxis in communication and learning—such as those noted above.

To consider the question of whether our field is reasonably well balanced in its focus, scholars were invited to respond to the question, “Do we study too much interpersonal communication and not enough of other topics in the instructional communication literature?” As it turned out, we primarily received submissions from those arguing for a strong emphasis on studying interpersonal communication in the classroom. Few submitters presented arguments in favor of more attention to alternative framings or topics beyond interpersonal communication. To make sure some of the opposing points were better represented in our opening stimulus essays, we asked Derek Lane to offer some arguments for a greater focus on learning outcomes. Responses by Scott Titsworth and Deanna Sellnow take the next step in dialogue by reflecting on the perspectives in the initial essays.

Writers in this forum engaged many dimensions of scholarship on interpersonal communication phenomena and student learning, including where our focus might be and how we can enhance quality of scholarship in that area. And, because of its breadth, it invites deeper reflection on many topics, particularly inviting us to further explore the enabling and constraining effects of instructional communication’s heavily interpersonal framing—in short, continuing to address the question of balance. And those outcomes are exactly what we seek. *Communication Education* forums are designed to start conversations, not end them. We hope these ideas spur you to continue this conversation with colleagues at work, in conference presentations, and in work you submit for publication.

## Acknowledgement

The editors thank Jeff Kerssen-Griep for his contributions to framing and articulating the ideas expressed in this editor’s introduction.

## STIMULUS ESSAYS

### The instructor-student relationship as an alternative form of superior–subordinate relationship

Scott A. Myers<sup>a</sup>

Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA

It is not much of a surprise that contemporary instructional communication scholars examine instructor–student interaction through an interpersonal communication lens. When the study of instructional communication emerged as formal area of study in the mid to late 1970s, much of the beginning research was conducted by interpersonal communication scholars who inserted interpersonal communication variables such as

---

**CONTACT** Scott A. Myers  Scott.Myers@mail.wvu.edu  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1221513>

nonverbal immediacy, communicator style, self-disclosure, and solidarity, to name a few, into the college classroom context (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006), with the ultimate goal of examining how these variables were associated with student learning. In fact, Nussbaum and Scott (1979) were the first researchers to proclaim that “while the instructional environment is unique in many respects, it also is a microcosm of the larger, interpersonal communication environment” (p. 578), thereby cementing the link between the subdisciplines of interpersonal communication and instructional communication and reiterating the notion that “when teachers and students ... begin to see each other as individuals, interpersonal relationships form” (Frymier & Houser, 2000, p. 217).

Instructional communication researchers have since continued to explore the association between instructor use of interpersonal communication behaviors and student learning, affirming my position that although instructional communication researchers may not have studied *too much* interpersonal communication, as a collective body of scholars, *we have not studied enough of other topics in the instructional communication literature*. It is important to consider that not all students view their classroom interactions or relationships with their instructors as interpersonal in nature, in part because they may consider this relationship to be more functional than relational or they may view instructors as fulfilling a role function more so than a personal function. As such, instructional communication researchers might consider examining the instructor–student relationship as a superior–subordinate relationship rather than as (or in addition to) an interpersonal communication relationship. Jablin (1979) conceptualized the superior–subordinate relationship as one in which one organizational member possesses the formal authority to direct and evaluate the activities of another member; this communication often is downward in that the superior provides subordinates with task rationale and instructions, performance feedback, and notification of workplace policies and procedures. In a summary of the functions of the superior–subordinate relationship, Sias (2009) noted that superiors provide subordinates with leadership and mentorship, act as information sources, and engage in performance appraisal, all of which are functions college instructors typically serve with their students.

On the surface, the classroom shares many characteristics with the organization (Sollitto, Johnson, & Myers, 2013), suggesting that the study of instructional communication can be informed just as well by examining the classroom—and the interactions that occur between instructors and students—as an organization. This suggestion is not a novel idea. Richmond and Roach (1992) were among the first researchers to identify several parallels that exist between the classroom and the workplace, noting that the instructor–student relationship is governed by a hierarchical or power structure similar to a supervisor–subordinate relationship and an established communication climate. Brophy (1983) forwarded that akin to an organization, the classroom is structured around both parties working toward goal achievement and task accomplishment, which in the instructional communication context is student learning. Chory and McCroskey (1999) posited that instructors utilize the same classroom communication behaviors that supervisors and managers use to positively influence subordinate (or student) behavior. Sollitto et al. (2013) argued that students—much like organizational newcomers—undergo an organizational assimilation process, with the ultimate goal of developing peer relationships with their classmates that enable them to feel greater levels of connection with both each other and their classmates as a whole.

Although early work examined how superiors and subordinates utilize instructional communication variables such as power bases and behavioral alteration techniques (see Richmond & Roach, 1992, for a review), it has not been until fairly recently that instructional communication researchers have begun to explore how organizational communication constructs (e.g., citizenship behavior, information seeking, feedback orientations, dissent, workplace bullying) can be adapted to the instructional communication context as a way to further explore students' perceptions of instructor in-class communication behavior and their self-reports of learning outcomes. Therefore, instructional communication scholars may be well advised to consider that the instructor-student relationship can be conceptualized in other ways than an interpersonal communication relationship. Studying the instructor-student relationship as a superior-subordinate relationship offers an alternative way to view how student learning occurs in the college classroom, and can provide instructional communication researchers with the opportunity to explore how structural and institutional variables—typically associated with organizational communication research but certainly relevant to the instructional communication context—influence student learning as well as the development, maintenance, and termination of the instructor-student relationship. Thus, in answer to the question as to whether instructional communication researchers study too much interpersonal communication and not enough of other topics in the instructional communication literature, the answer is affirmative. While the genesis of instructional communication can be attributed to the study of interpersonal communication and the application of these interpersonal communication constructs is informative, we need to consider that the organizational communication literature can be equally as informative when applied to the study of the instructor-student relationship.

## References

- Brophy, J. (1983). Conceptualizing student motivation. *Educational Psychologist*, 18, 200–215. doi:10.1080/0046152809529274
- Chory, R. M., & McCroskey, J. C. (1999). The relationship between teacher management communication style and affective learning. *Communication Quarterly*, 47, 1–11. doi:10.1080/01463379909370120
- Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (2000). The teacher-student relationship as an interpersonal relationship. *Communication Education*, 49, 207–219. doi:10.1080/0364520009379209
- Jablin, F. M. (1979). Superior-subordinate communication: The state of the art. *Psychological Bulletin*, 86, 1201–1222.
- McCroskey, J. C., Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, L. L. (2006). The role of communication in instruction: The first three decades. In B. M. Gayle, R. W. Preiss, N. Burrell, & M. Allen (Eds.), *Classroom communication and instructional processes* (pp. 15–28). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Nussbaum, J. F., & Scott, M. D. (1979). Instructor communication behaviors and their relationship to classroom learning. In D. Nimmo (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 3* (pp. 561–583). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Richmond, V. P., & Roach, K. D. (1992). Power in the classroom: Seminal studies. In V. P. Richmond & J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Power in the classroom: Communication, control, and concern* (pp. 67–84). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Sias, P. M. (2009). *Organizing relationships: Traditional and emerging perspectives on workplace relationships*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Sollitto, M., Johnson, Z. D., & Myers, S. A. (2013). Students' perceptions of college classroom connectedness, assimilation, and peer relationships. *Communication Education*, 62, 318–331. doi:10.1080/03634523.2013.788726

## Interpersonal communication research in instructional contexts: a dyadic approach

Alan K. Goodboy<sup>a</sup> and Deborah A. Kashy<sup>b</sup>

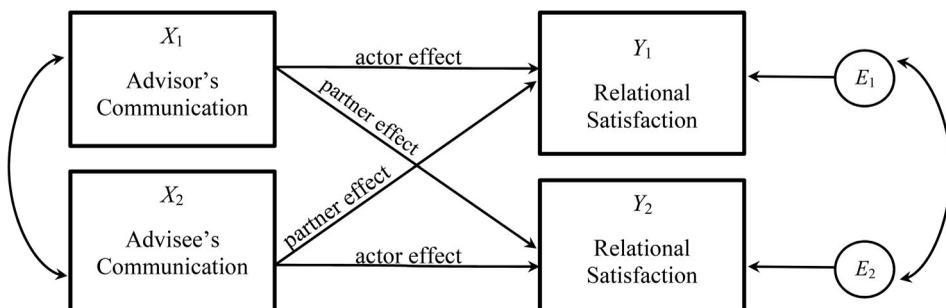
<sup>a</sup>Communication Studies, West Virginia University, Morgantown, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA

*Do we study too much interpersonal communication and not enough of other topics in the instructional communication literature?* Undoubtedly, this forum will be mixed with affirmative and negative responses to this important question. On one hand, answering “yes” is quite defensible because there are many recent studies examining interpersonal communication variables in classroom settings that offer little or no insight into student learning. This is an imbalance; assessments of student learning should be a top priority in instructional communication scholarship. On the other hand, an answer of “no” to this question is also justified because instructional scholars are not conducting research on interpersonal communication with the same rigor and/or quality that interpersonal scholars undertake. Instructional scholars who examine interpersonal communication variables almost exclusively rely on cross-sectional self-report data from one perspective—the student participant’s perspective. However, interpersonal communication inherently involves at least two people, and both people’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior have bearing on communication processes. Interpersonal scholars recognize this dyadic nature of interpersonal communication, and so they regularly collect and analyze dyadic data from two individuals in an interdependent relationship. Instructional scholars do not follow their lead, even though dozens of interpersonal studies published in the discipline’s top journals examine interpersonal relationships using the dyad as the unit of analysis (for a recent example, see Knobloch, Sharabi, Delaney, & Suranne, 2016).

So, although instructional scholars publish an abundance of research examining interpersonal variables in educational settings, their research almost always underestimates the interpersonal dynamics that occur between people. To answer the forum question, then, our position is “no,” we do not study too much interpersonal communication instead of other topics. Regardless of the abundance of research featuring interpersonal variables and outcomes in classroom settings, we are not meeting the empirical benchmarks that interpersonal communication scholars set when they regularly collect and publish data from both parties in an interpersonal relationship. After all, interpersonal communication frequently occurs between *two* interdependent people in a casual or close relationship. If instructional scholars really want to fully examine interpersonal communication processes in classroom settings (and *ideally*, how these processes influence student learning and academic achievement, in addition to interpersonal outcomes), they should adopt dyadic approaches to collecting and analyzing their data.

There are plenty of interpersonal (family and other) dyads that could be studied in instructional communication: teacher–student, parent–student, advisor–advisee, mentor–protégé, college roommates, classroom peers, and romantic partners, among others. We know that students learn more and have better academic achievement when these individuals provide them with academic support (e.g. Thompson & Mazer, 2009). Conducting research that focuses on both partners involved in an interaction or relationship can be challenging, as can the statistical methods required for analyzing such dyadic data. Nonetheless, appropriate data-analytic approaches allow researchers to examine important communication processes such as self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, consensus, and mutual influence. A full treatment of statistical requirements and options for dyadic analysis is beyond the scope of this forum (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006, for full explanations). In short, dyadic analysis must account for nonindependence in the data because individuals in an interpersonal relationship share much in common, or as Kenny (1996) put it, “partners in ongoing relationships score similarly on many measures of relational characteristics ... if ignored, this non-independence can bias the tests of significance” (p. 279).

By treating dyads as the unit of analysis (e.g. the advisor–advisee relationship), instructional scholars are then able to examine the mutual influence that occurs in the nonindependent relationship, not just one individual’s (almost always the student’s) perspective. One design to accomplish this (there are other dyadic designs—see Kashy & Kenny, 2000) is the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006). The APIM accounts for the nonindependence within members of the dyad and is estimated using multilevel modeling or structural equation modeling (Kashy & Donnellan, 2012). A hypothetical instructional communication study proposing an APIM is depicted in Figure 1. The strength of the APIM is that it allows for a researcher to hypothesize *actor effects* (e.g. the effect of an advisor’s communication on his/her own relationship satisfaction) and *partner effects* (e.g. the effect of an advisee’s communication on the advisor’s relationship satisfaction, and vice versa). Moreover, the APIM allows for researchers to hypothesize dyadic tests of mediation (see Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011) and moderation (see Garcia, Kenny, & Ledermann, 2015) to more completely examine dyadic communication occurring within the interpersonal relationship.



**Figure 1.** Hypothetical actor–partner interdependence model.

Note: The two  $X$  variables for Advisor and Advisee are measured with the same instrument; likewise, the two  $Y$  variables are measured with the same instrument.

As instructional communication scholars continue to study how interpersonal processes and outcomes function in educational settings, it is important for them to consider collecting dyadic data, and incorporating appropriate data analytic techniques such as the APIM. We tend to study interpersonal variables in a manner that overlooks there are *two* people involved in communication processes that shape student learning experiences and academic outcomes. Perhaps it is time for instructional scholars, who insist on studying interpersonal variables, to recognize this and model their research after interpersonal scholars by embracing a dyadic perspective.

## References

- Garcia, R. L., Kenny, D. A., & Ledermann, T. (2015). Moderation in the actor-partner interdependence model. *Personal Relationships*, 22, 8–29. doi:10.1111/perc.12060
- Kashy, D. A., & Donnellan, M. B. (2012). Conceptual and methodological issues in the analysis of data from dyads and groups. In K. Deaux & M. Snyder (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of personality and social psychology* (pp. 209–238). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kashy, D. A., & Kenny, D. A. (2000). The analysis of data from dyads and groups. In H. T. Reis & C. M. Judd (Eds.), *Handbook of research methods in social psychology* (pp. 451–477). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kenny, D. A. (1996). Models of non-independence in dyadic research. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 13, 279–294. doi:10.1177/0265407596132007
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. L. (2006). *Dyadic data analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Knobloch, L. K., Sharabi, L. L., Delaney, A. L., & Suranne, S. M. (2016). The role of relational uncertainty in topic avoidance among couples with depression. *Communication Monographs*, 83, 25–48. doi:10.1080/03637751.2014.998691
- Ledermann, T., Macho, S., & Kenny, D. A. (2011). Assessing mediation in dyadic data using the actor-partner interdependence model. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 18, 595–612. doi:10.1080/10705511.2011.607099
- Thompson, B., & Mazer, J. P. (2009). College student ratings of student academic support: Frequency, importance, and modes of communication. *Communication Education*, 58, 433–458. doi:10.1080/03634520902930440

## A cautious approach to reliance on interpersonal communication frameworks: the importance of context in instructional communication research

Zac D. Johnson<sup>a</sup>, Sara LaBelle<sup>b</sup> and Jennifer H. Waldeck<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Human Communication Studies, California State University, Fullerton, USA;

<sup>b</sup>Communication Studies Department, Chapman University, Orange, USA

Instructional communication (IC) scholars have made significant contributions to the study of educational outcomes by creating a deep understanding of the teacher-student

relationship (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). IC research published in *Communication Education* and other outlets therefore appropriately emphasizes interpersonal communication—the relational, emotional, and affective component of communication related to learning. However, IC is suffering from an identity crisis and potential irrelevance as a result of continued dependence on theoretical frameworks and constructs coopted from other areas of the field. After decades of research on variables such as immediacy, power, humor, and conflict, IC has become another “container” for interpersonal communication rather than a conceptually distinct area of scholarship. Although teachers and students do form meaningful relationships, to consider instructional communication as interchangeable with interpersonal communication limits and constrains the conceptual precision of IC research.

There are four key distinctions between instructional and interpersonal relationships that render a treatment of instruction as an interpersonal context inappropriate. First, teacher–student relationships are not interdependent in ways that intimate relationships are; each party has different expected goals (e.g., teachers seek to create rigorous learning environment/students want to matriculate). Second, due to uniquely rigid roles in instructional contexts, perspective-taking can be more difficult for teachers and students than for friends or partners. Third, though mentoring relationships are an exception, most teacher–student relationships eventually end and are rarely characterized by the same intimacy of interpersonal relationships. Fourth, power differences substantively impact the nature of instructional relationships. As a result of these differences, unique situations emerge in instructional settings (e.g., a disagreement over a grade, corrective feedback) that are qualitatively different from disagreements in interpersonal relationships characterized by similar goals, easier perspective-taking, equally distributed power, and the expectation that the relationship will be maintained over a long period of time. These differences cannot be ignored theoretically or practically.

As the field of organizational communication distinguished itself from interpersonal (despite organizations being characterized by interpersonal dynamics; Tomkins & Wanca-Thibault, 2001), so must instructional communication. Scholarly examinations of communication should be appropriately located within a particular and specific context (Hymes, 1974). Pettegrew (2016) implores researchers to consider not only *context*—in the case of IC, education—but also setting and situation. He defines *setting* as the site where interaction happens (e.g., classroom or specific out of class location) and *situation* as the reason for communication (e.g., to inform, clarify, correct). Pettegrew’s argument demonstrates that while instructors and students may be in a situation to communicate interpersonally (i.e., to build relationships), these actions are shaped by both the context and setting. Thus, treating instruction as interpersonal communication not only impedes IC from growing in scope and legitimacy as a scholarly field, but also limits our conceptual and operational ability to understand the unique nature of instructional communication.

Context, situation, and setting of teacher–student interactions constitute the nexus of why their communication is differentiated from interpersonal dynamics. The differentiation is evident in the research concerning confirmation, an interpersonal construct, within the classroom. Ellis (2000) found that teachers confirm students in very different

ways than truly interpersonal relational partners. The research on teacher self-disclosure also demonstrates these differences: when students perceive such disclosures as irrelevant to course content, they experience decreased interest and motivation in the course (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). This outcome is fundamentally different than what interpersonal partners typically experience. Similarly, though teachers may need narrative skill (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988) to achieve clarity and student understanding, students likely do not need this skill to effectively interact with teachers. Further, although Rawlins (2000) encourages teacher–student friendships, he acknowledged that these relationships are challenging due to the nature of instruction and the inherent dialectical tension on close relationships they may form. Therefore, when considering how teachers communicate with students, and how students may reciprocate that communication, the framework utilized by Frymier and Houser (1999) is a less-than-optimal lens.

Despite its prevalence in instructional communication, an interpersonal contextual frame limits and constrains IC's ability to create a robust understanding of communication related to learning. Despite its interdisciplinary roots, IC must create an appropriate, independent identity. To further legitimize and develop instructional communication as a serious area of inquiry, scholars must treat this context as an opportunity to explore unique communication patterns, rather than continuing to rely heavily on interpersonal communication concepts and frameworks that unnecessarily inhibit our ability to generate knowledge related to the educational context (classroom and nonclassroom settings), and the variety of situations that occur therein.

## References

- Cayanus, J. L., & Martin, M. M. (2008). Teacher self-disclosure: Amount, relevance, and negativity. *Communication Quarterly*, 56, 325–341. doi:10.1080/01463370802241492
- Downs, V. C., Javidi, M. M., & Nussbaum, J. F. (1988). An analysis of teachers' verbal communication within the college classroom: Use of humor, self-disclosure, and narrative. *Communication Education*, 37, 121–141. doi:10.1080/03634528809378710
- Ellis, K. (2000). Perceived teacher confirmation. *Human Communication Research*, 26, 264–291. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2000.tb00758.x
- Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (1999). The teacher–student relationship as an interpersonal relationship. *Communication Education*, 49, 207–219. doi:10.1080/03634520009379209
- Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations of sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mottet, T. P., & Beebe, S. A. (2006). Foundations of instructional communication. In T. P. Mottet, V. P. Richmond, & J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Handbook of Instructional Communication* (pp. 3–32). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pettegrew, L. S. (2016). The importance of context, situation, and setting in consulting. In J. H. Waldeck & D. R. Seibold (Eds.), *Consulting that matters: A handbook for scholars and practitioners* (pp. 49–62). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Rawlins, W. K. (2000). Teaching as a mode of friendship. *Communication Theory*, 10, 5–26. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00176.x
- Tomkins, P. K., & Wanca-Thibault, M. (2001). Organizational communication: Prelude and prospects. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication* (pp. xvii–xxx). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## The interplay between interpersonal communication and instructional communication

Narissra Maria Punyanunt-Carter<sup>a</sup> and V. Santiago Arias<sup>a</sup>

Communication Studies, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, USA

Do we study too much interpersonal communication and not enough of other topics in the instructional communication literature? The answer to that question is both yes and no. As communication education scholars, we spend a lot of time studying both interpersonal communication dynamics and instructional communication variables. Looking over the past few years in *Communication Education*, it is evident that scholars have been focusing on interpersonal aspects—such as self-disclosure, feedback, or rapport—and its subsequent display in computer-mediated interactions between teachers and students through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). The “most read” articles in *Communication Education* journal also suggest that new technologies, such as email, chat rooms, avatar-based communication forums, voice image transmissions, the World Wide Web, blogs, vlogs, social networking sites, in which users may play an active role as audiences, have been influencing the teacher–student interpersonal relationship by increasingly mimicking the two-directional communication flow between new CMC and users; akin, influencing the teaching-centered role to become a more participatory instructional setting. Consequently, in terms of what are the “most cited” articles in this area, an overemphasis on interpersonal dimensions in the interactional context has been predominantly mentioned and used in various publications; thus, it is evident that over time research published in the journal has underemphasized some fundamental instructional communication variables such as student outcomes, messages that foster student learning/engagement, and motivation as much as the interpersonal. The instructional setting as a communication context has its mechanics that importantly affect communication behavior of both teachers and students; subsequently, scholarly analysis of instructional communication phenomena cannot be reduced exclusively to interpersonal communication variables. However, the overemphasis on interpersonal elements in the instructional setting has provided a false assumption that these instructional and interpersonal communications elements go hand in hand.

The teacher–student relationship has several common characteristics with interpersonal relationships because both are trying to achieve goals, gather information, and engage in conflict resolution. Notwithstanding, the communication mechanics of the instructional interaction are delineated by specific elements of the classroom context that makes the teacher–student relationship very unique. After pointing out scholarly profusion for aspects of interpersonal communication—humor, disclosure, immediacy, and communicator style—Frymier and Houser (2000) asserted that communication education scholarship must not focus solely on interpersonal variables while perusing the

---

**CONTACT** Narissra Maria Punyanunt-Carter  n.punyanunt@ttu.edu  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1221512>

instructional context; the authors highlighted that the teacher–student relationship involves a power dynamic and do not require relationship maintenance or relationship development; we know that this interaction is also limited by time boundaries such as academic year, semester, quarter, and so on. Teachers truly hold a prerogative position in classroom because they have the instructional power on the basis of knowledge advantage over students to structure content and activities for students to learn, then possessing the privilege to set communication boundaries and mechanics, but also grasping a tremendous responsibility because structuring classroom events has powerful effects on students' motivation to engage in learning for its own sake (Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2012).

The classroom is a communication context that primarily calls upon individuals to receive messages because students have a disadvantage of knowledge and expertise compared to teachers; thus, individuals seek instructional settings to gain information. Content instigates individuals to display positive or negative attitudes and emotions while receiving messages (Roberts & Vinson, 1998). Instructor communication skills highly impact and predict student learning and motivation (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001), because it influences students' willingness to listen that also importantly affects students' anxiety to process complex and challenging information (Roberts & Vinson, 1998). As communication scholars, we should focus on how instructors can communicate to make learning better and more effective for students.

Some scholars might argue that in order to make communication better, we need to focus mostly on interpersonal aspects of the relationship. Looking through the previous issues of *Communication Education*, one can obviously see how publications have stressed communication aspects in the interpersonal realm. As stated on the journal's website, the goal is to focus on communication and learning, but how can instructors improve learning, retention, and comprehension of classroom material without communication behaviors? How can we communicate effectively enough to make learning take place? Yet, instructional communication scholars need to focus on what works in the classroom, and how can they without looking at interpersonal dynamics? Ellis (2000) found the teacher–student relationship directly and indirectly affects cognitive learning. Furthermore, student listening affects student motivation and overall student learning (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001). Frymier and Houser (2000) discovered that the quality of teacher–student interaction substantially impacts students' attitudes toward a given class content. For these reasons, it would be hard to study instructional communication without looking at some of the very important interpersonal variables that happen in the classroom between teachers and their students.

In conclusion, to truly understand communication education, we must analyze both interpersonal and instructional variables. Instructors, researchers, and scholars need to find a balance between content and relationship aspects while being aware of context boundaries to truly assist in maximizing learning outcomes. Our scholarship must not undermine the study of interpersonal communication or vice versa; communication in classrooms encompasses interpersonal communication factors tethered to the specific instructional contextual boundaries, and knowing in what situations technological innovations enhance the teacher–student relationship is the new challenge. Overall, *Communication Education* scholars, readers, and teachers should incorporate the best practices of interpersonal and instructional communication in order to make learning more effective and possibly affective.

## References

- Chesebro, J. L., & McCroskey, J. C. (2001). The relationship of teacher clarity and immediacy with student state receiver apprehension, affect, and cognitive learning. *Communication Education*, 50, 59–68.
- Ellis, K. (2000). Perceived teacher confirmation. *Human Communication Research*, 26, 264–291.
- Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (2000). The teacher–student relationship as an interpersonal relationship. *Communication Education*, 49, 207–219. doi:10.1080/03634520009379209
- Roberts, C. V., & Vinson, L. (1998). Relationship among willingness to listen, receiver apprehension, communication apprehension, communication competence, and dogmatism. *International Journal of Listening*, 12, 40–56.
- Schunk, D. H., Meece, J. R., & Pintrich, P. R. (2012). *Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

## Raising new questions and restoring our focus on authentic student learning

Derek R. Lane

Department of Communication, University of Kentucky, Lexington, USA

To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.

—Albert Einstein

To answer the question posed in this forum, I am obligated to reflect on whether we have accumulated sufficient knowledge about interpersonal communication in the instructional context—at least as it pertains to the relational perspective—and whether we have ignored other meaningful topics in the instructional communication literature. My purpose here is to address both of these issues by considering the value of raising new questions and envisioning possibilities for restoring our focus on improving authentic student learning outcomes. As such, I advance the argument that we have still have much to learn about instructional communication from the relational perspective *and* that we can advance our discipline by restoring our focus on authentic student learning.

While it would be ill advised to discount the empirical evidence we have accumulated as an academic discipline using the both the rhetorical and relational approaches, there is a scarcity of research published in the past two decades that either (1) explains how the particular nature of the teacher–student relationship may differ from other interpersonal relationships (see Sprague, 1993) or (2) clarifies why developing such relationships might yield increases in either student knowledge acquisition or the ability of students to apply and use such information. We can be optimistic that studies of confirmation, turning points, rapport, motivation, and participation are useful in informing such explanations, but because most of our published studies rely primarily on self-reports of learning indicators, we simply do not have the data to demonstrate that developing

instructional relationships will actually improve authentic student learning. We may gain valuable insights by considering how, if at all, instructional relationships improve student knowledge acquisition. Is it possible that instructional relationships can be detrimental to student learning? Could these relationships increase student stress because the student does not want to disappoint their professor and, in turn, reduce the student's capacity to acquire new knowledge?

There is little doubt that the 21st century has shown marked improvement in the quality of scholarship and knowledge claims advanced by instructional communication scholars—especially knowledge claims associated with the relational perspective. We have an abundance of evidence supporting the importance of instructor immediacy, credibility, confirmation, clarity, relevance, and a host of other instructional behaviors that have been demonstrated to lead to greater levels of student satisfaction, student affect (towards the class and teacher), learner empowerment, and other self-reported learning indicators. We have seen a growth in the number of instructional scholars who have incorporated structural equation modeling in their data analysis in an effort to improve instructional communication theoretical models and explanations. However, because we have largely decontextualized learning by asking students to evaluate the instructor of the class they attended immediately prior to the class in which they were completing our surveys, we know very little about the actual learning experience—beyond student self-reports of the instructor and what a student believes they have “learned.” Is the class on which they are reporting required or elective? Is the course a prerequisite for other courses—or does the course require prerequisites for which the student is ill prepared? Is the instructional content more difficult to master because it is mathematical or technical? Is the course taught online, in small groups, or is it larger than 200 students? We are painfully aware that context matters, but we have largely overlooked how these important details impact instructional dynamics.

The original use of the “previous class methodology” served us well to increase the statistical power and variance in our instructor samples, but it may well be time to develop additional innovative strategies for determining how interpersonal constructs are being used to facilitate authentic learning (defined as measurable and relatively permanent *change* in behavior through experience, instruction, or study; see Lane, 2015). As such, instructional scholars should be encouraged to increase their use of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that include the use of pretests to demonstrate measurable *changes* in student attitudes, knowledge and skills. RCTs can be used to enhance the confidence in our knowledge claims and go beyond traditional cross-sectional self-report data. Additionally, we should include instructional interactional dyads as the unit of analysis in order to reduce our reliance on student self-reported perceptions. Developing more sensitive measures of student cognitive learning and behavioral (psychomotor) learning would also increase the overall value of instructional research knowledge claims.

The ongoing debate over excellence in education and the future of our country has been raging for the last 30 years. What began with the landmark publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) continued with *Crisis in the Academy: Rethinking Higher Education in America* (1996) and now includes *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (2006), *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011) and *Fail U.: The False Promise of Higher Education* (2016). Within the landscape of the debate is an ever-growing mandate for transparency

and a public demand for increased accountability in higher education—especially with respect to student learning. During the same 30-year time frame, the subdiscipline of instructional communication has also experienced its fair share of turbulence. While we have addressed complaints of being largely atheoretical, variable-analytic and nonprogrammable (Nussbaum & Friedrich, 2005; Waldeck, Kearney, & Plax, 2001), we have largely been unsuccessful in our efforts to focus on actual classroom behavior, specific teacher–student interaction, or on classrooms that include younger and older learners. We are making progress (Dannels, 2016) but the *raison d'être* that will elevate our scholarship to the level where scholars from throughout the academy will feel compelled to follow and cite our research is our commitment to focusing on evidence that demonstrates how and why instructional communication messages and behaviors can be used to predict authentic student learning.

## References

- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bok, D. (2006). *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dannels, D. P. (2016). Opening lines: Scholarly inquiry and learning outcomes in communication. *Communication Education*, 65, 480–483. doi:10.1080/03634523.2016.1208260
- Lane, D. R. (2015). The instructional communication affective learning paradox. *Communication Education*, 64, 510–515. doi: 10.1080/03634523.2015.1066020
- Lucas, C. J. (1996). *Crisis in the academy: Rethinking higher education in America*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Nussbaum, J. F., & Friedrich, G. (2005). Instructional/developmental communication: Current theory, research, and future trends. *Journal of Communication*, 55(3), 578–593.
- Sprague, J. (1993). Why teaching works: The transformative power of pedagogical communication. *Communication Education*, 42, 349–366. doi: 10.1080/03634529309378951
- Sykes, C. J. (2016). *Fail U: The false promise of higher education*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform: A report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education*. Washington, DC: The Commission.
- Waldeck, J. H., Kearney, P., & Plax, T. G. (2001). Instructional and developmental communication theory and research in the 1990s: Extending the agenda for the 21st century. In W. B. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Communication Yearbook 24* (pp. 207–229). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## RESPONSES

### Improving situational awareness for instructional communication research: a forum response

Scott Titsworth

School of Communication Studies, Ohio University, Athens, USA

---

**CONTACT** Scott Titsworth  titswort@ohio.edu  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1245861>

© 2016 National Communication Association

Authors in this forum provide direct and well-justified answers to the guiding question. Although nuanced differences exist, readers will likely arrive at a common conclusion: *instructional communication scholarship must carefully address the uniqueness of the instructional setting in our work*. In short, we must develop far greater *situational awareness* to guide our theory, research, and practice—we must recognize that instructional settings are not exactly like other contexts explored by colleagues across the field. In this response, I analyze similarities among the forum essays and then offer ideas for how instructional communication scholars might adopt greater situational awareness in research, theory, and application of our work.

Several of the forum essays provide compelling justifications for why interpersonal communication cannot simply be overlaid as a synecdochic container for teaching and learning. For instance, Punyanaunt-Carter and Arias observed that the “communication mechanics” of instructional settings, including both face-to-face and online, make teacher–student relationships unique from the broader domain of interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Johnson, LaBelle, and Waldeck point out that the noninterdependence, role rigidity, comparatively rapid relationship cycles, and power differentials between teachers and students all contribute to tension when viewing instructional relationships solely through traditional interpersonal communication lenses. Goodboy and Kashy do not eschew the interpersonal lens but call for greater precision in research practices to truly capture the dyadic assumptions underpinning that perspective. Likewise, Lane argues that the relational perspective has much to offer instructional researchers, provided that a strong focus on “authentic student learning” remains at the forefront of our attention. Finally, Myers offers an alternative—that the classroom is more analogous to an organizational environment where teacher–student relationships are similar to superior–subordinate relationships. Common to these authors is the assumption that the instructional context has unique characteristics making it distinct from most interpersonal relationships. I offer three points to further crystalize the need for greater situational awareness as we engage instructional research projects.

First, our theory, research, and practices should place greater emphasis on the communication situation we are studying. Teachers depend on communication to instill a culture of learning in their classes. As explained by DiTullio (2014),

We need to be conscientious about creating a classroom environment where students can safely take risks and more importantly safely fail. This requires a challenging curriculum, differentiated instruction, cooperation, planned interdependence, and the direct teaching of listening, leading, and speaking skills. (p. 40)

Our scholarship should explore these processes in greater detail by examining ways in which classroom cultures are created and sustained through communication. The field of communication has much to offer in terms of exploring the cocreation of culture. By emphasizing the processes through which classroom cultures are established, as well as the outcomes, instructional communication researchers can more effectively navigate various interpersonal, group, and organizational dynamics as they relate to classroom communication.

Second, we should become more precise in defining the range of interconnected relationships present in instructional settings. For example, some teacher–student

relationships are very personal, such as in mentor–mentee relationships, and others are more akin to the superior–subordinate relationships described by Myers. Additionally, we should recognize that instructional environments comprise multiple, mutually influential relationships (see Raufelder, Bukowski, & Mohr, 2013). Our failure to fully analyze the complexity of relationships within educational settings has likely led to the shortcut of approaching such settings from primarily an interpersonal perspective. Broadening our understandings of these multiple relationships will productively expand the diversity of our research questions while at the same time deepening our theoretical orientations toward instructional communication.

Third, we should orient our research programs around problems rather than variables. As Punyanunt-Carter and Arias observed, “we should focus on how instructors can communicate to make learning better and more effective for students.” In addition, we should be concerned with student engagement, persistence, emotional orientations toward learning, and specific classroom behaviors, such as note-taking and use of learning strategies, that are connected to academic success. A problem-based focus for our research will necessarily force scholars to expand beyond the relatively small number of variables that tend to dominate instructional research to consider more holistic models. For instance, consideration of topics like classroom size, differing communication norms and expectations across disciplines and cultures, and divergent practices for students of varying ages are examples of issues that potentially impact problems of learning and classroom communication that are given far too little attention in our research.

In our quest to be more precise in considering instructional settings as unique from interpersonal, group, or even organizational contexts, we must be careful to avoid two pitfalls. First, as we articulate the uniqueness of instructional settings, we should not create artificial barriers. Though we are unique in what we study, we should not overstate that uniqueness in ways that make us disconnected from the larger field. Second, we must avoid painting a monolithic picture of instructional settings. As we point to viable reasons why some classroom circumstances are distinct from interpersonal communication or other domains, we must recognize that variety exists within educational settings. Through situational awareness of the unique situations we study, instructional scholars will be better equipped to infer connections to the broader field while also recognizing unique characteristics of our research contexts that should inform our conclusions.

Authors in this forum lay a groundwork for advancing instructional communication research, theory, and application. Although we should not dismiss the role of interpersonal communication in educational settings, we should broaden our situational awareness to identify fundamental research problems, focusing on germane outcomes related to student learning, and then approaching research and theory to fully identify contributions that are uniquely representative of the communication field.

## References

- DiTullio, G. (2014). Classroom culture promotes academic resiliency. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96, 37–40. doi:10.1177/0031721714553408

Raufelder, D., Bukowski, W. M., & Mohr, S. (2013). Thick description of the teacher–student relationship in the educational context of school: Results of an ethnographic field study. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 1, 1–18. doi:10.11114/jets.v1i2.108

## What role should interpersonal communication play (or not) in instructional communication research: a response to the forum essays

Deanna D. Sellnow

University of Central Florida

In one of his most renowned and yet cogent books, *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) wrote that “mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*” (p. 17). As I read the essays published in this forum, I heard Dewey’s words as the authors struggled with the either-or question regarding the role of interpersonal communication in instructional research. That said, I argue that this is not an either-or question at all. Rather, the problem we need to rectify rests with the outcome measures of much of the research focused on interpersonal constructs in instructional settings. I advance my argument by focusing on what instructional communication is, an assessment of the essays included in this forum, how interpersonal communication-based instructional research foci ought to be adjusted to truly advance instructional communication research, and a call for future research in instructional communication that will place it where it belongs not only in classroom settings, but also in the living world beyond the academy.

Instructional communication differs from communication education (i.e., the study of teaching communication) and is defined as “the study of [the] human communication process as it occurs in instructional contexts—across subject matter, grade levels and types of settings” (Staton, 1989, p. 365). If we agree that instructional communication focuses on this *role of communication in instruction regardless of context*, then it follows that our research ought to focus on how various communication processes influence learning regardless of context. This is a place where instructional communication has lost its focus and, in my opinion, needs to regroup.

Drawing from educational research, we understand that learning is measured by three distinct learning outcome variables: (1) affect, (2) cognition, and (3) behavior. Affect has to do with learners’ perceptions of the value/utility of the content. Cognition has to do with learners’ understanding of the content. Behavior has to do with the degree to which learners can perform or apply the content to their lived experiences. If instructional communication research studies were to focus on one or more of these outcomes (as opposed to, for example, learner satisfaction or empowerment), we would effectively

address what Johnson, LaBelle, and Waldeck rightly claim to be an “identity crisis” in instructional communication.

Moreover, I posit that all communication phenomena (and consequently all communication theories) can be categorized as relational, instructional, or persuasive. In other words, we communicate (1) to build, maintain, or dissolve relationships in a variety of contexts (e.g., health care, families, friendships, classrooms), (2) to instruct for understanding and/or performance in a variety of contexts (e.g., health care, families, friendships, classrooms), and (3) to persuade for reinforcing or reforming dispositions and/or behaviors in a variety of contexts (e.g., health care, families, friendships, classrooms). Thus, instructional communication (and instructional communication research) should not be narrowly conceived solely as what happens in a classroom (although it certainly ought to happen in a classroom as one important context). Rather, instructional communication should be conceived as a broad communication phenomenon that occurs in all sorts of communication contexts, and its success or failure ought to be measured by learning outcome variables (affect, cognition, behavior).

With my stance now clearly stated, I move to point out some gems in each of the essays included in this forum, as well as my perceptual twist on each of them. The gem in the essay by Myers is his suggestion that we consider other topics, specifically organizational research. Myers suggests that we look at superior–subordinate relationships in classrooms much like what is done in organizational communication literature. My twist is to suggest that, rather than focus on superior–subordinate relationships in classrooms measured by organizational communication variables, we ought to focus on *how these relationships influence learning* not only in the classroom but also in the workplace. The gem in the Goodboy and Kashy essay is their claim that “assessments of student learning should be a top priority in instructional communication scholarship.” Where I want to challenge them and others is to focus on learning as outcome variables even when studying interpersonal communication constructs in classroom contexts. If not, then we must call such studies interpersonal ones (albeit in classroom contexts) rather than instructional ones. The gem in the Johnson, LaBelle, and Waldeck essay is their point that instructional communication “has become another container for interpersonal communication rather than a conceptually distinct area of scholarship.” Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with studying interpersonal communication phenomena in the classroom, but the outcomes must focus on learning rather than relationships. Otherwise, these studies ought to be classified as interpersonal studies in classroom contexts. Similarly, I agree with Punyanunt-Carter and Arias that instructional communication research has “under-emphasized some fundamental instructional communication variables” and focused instead on interpersonal relationship ones. And, finally, the gem in Lane’s essay is that we must focus on authentic learning outcome variables (rather than student perceptions) regardless of whether we are studying student–student, teacher–student, student–teacher interpersonal interactions, or other important communication processes that occur in the teaching and learning environment across contexts.

To build on what I have articulated in the previous paragraphs, the problem I see in instructional communication research is not about whether or not to study interpersonal communication phenomena in classrooms. Rather, the problem rests with the outcome variables we measure in them. They must focus on learning if we are to claim the studies are instructional communication ones. Otherwise, they are merely interpersonal

communication studies examined in classroom contexts. This is an extremely important point. If we do not shift our focus as instructional communication researchers to focus on learning outcome variables not only in classrooms but also across communication contexts, we will continue to limit the ways in which we can contribute broadly to the field of communication research and theory.

To summarize, where do instructional communication researchers need to place our focus going forward? First, we must shift the outcome variables of our research to focus on learning (affect, cognition, behavior). This is not to say the plethora of interpersonal studies conducted in classrooms to date or to be conducted in classrooms in the future are invaluable or irrelevant; however, it is to say instead that such studies are not instructional in nature unless they measure learning outcomes. Second, and equally important, instructional communication occurs in communication contexts well beyond classrooms. What we can offer across contexts if we measure learning outcomes has the potential to place instructional communication as a primary research focus in our field, with conclusions that could save lives in health care contexts, risk and crisis situations, interpersonal contexts, and more. In fact, some research today has begun to do so (e.g., Sellnow, et al., 2015). All we have to do is rise to the challenge to break out of our classroom context cocoons to demonstrate the relevance of our research to colleagues not only across the communication field, but also to the academy and to practicing professionals in the world around us.

## References

- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Sellnow, D. D., Limperos, A., Frisby, B., Spence, P., Sellnow, T., & Downs, E. (2015). Expanding the scope of instructional communication research: Looking beyond classroom contexts. *Communication Studies*, 66, 417–432.
- Staton, A. Q. (1989). The interface of communication and instruction: Conceptual considerations and programmatic manifestations. *Communication Education*, 38, 364–371.