A communication and instruction approach to embodied cultural and social capital at a public, 4-year university

C. Kyle Rudick, Fernando Ismael Quiñones Valdivia, Lexi Hudachek, Jackson Specker & Alan K. Goodboy

To cite this article: C. Kyle Rudick, Fernando Ismael Quiñones Valdivia, Lexi Hudachek, Jackson Specker & Alan K. Goodboy (2019) A communication and instruction approach to embodied cultural and social capital at a public, 4-year university, Communication Education, 68:4, 438-459, DOI: 10.1080/03634523.2019.1642501

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2019.1642501
A communication and instruction approach to embodied cultural and social capital at a public, 4-year university

C. Kyle Rudick¹, Fernando Ismael Quiñones Valdivia², Lexi Hudachek³, Jackson Specker³ and Alan K. Goodboy⁴

¹Department of Communication Studies, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, U.S.A.; ²Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, Penn State University, University Park, U.S.A.; ³Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University, Morgantown, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT
In this study, we explore how students identify and navigate the social structure of higher education and how, in doing so, they communicatively (re)produce socializing norms. To this end, we draw upon the work of the late educational sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to outline a critical communication pedagogical understanding of institutional socialization at a public, 4-year university. We conducted focus groups with 36 college students to understand their perceptions of (in)appropriate communicative behaviors, norms, and attitudes in higher education. We then discuss the importance of their perceptions of social and cultural capital, connect their ascriptions to the (re)production of existing social relationships, and advocate for a renewed focus on seemingly innocuous communication and instruction concepts and variables in light of our findings. Finally, we offer ways for instructors to intervene into the socialization process by making the culture of power visible to all educational participants.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 April 2019
Accepted 7 July 2019

KEYWORDS
Bourdieu; social capital; cultural capital; critical communication pedagogy; organizational communication

In March of 2019, federal prosecutors brought charges against 33 wealthy parents for attempting to buy their children’s way into elite schools, such as Yale and Stanford (Medina, Benner, & Taylor, 2019). Dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues,” the instance, netting celebrities and CEOs alike, laid bare the lengths that the wealthy will go in order to secure their families’ economic future. Of course, there have always been ways that the wealthy have gamed the system of higher education for themselves and their children, such as legacy admissions, donations, or athletic status (see Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005). However, the recent scandal gave the public a stark reminder of the way that higher education is used as a tool for the well-off to continue their trajectory of wealth accumulation.

It may seem odd that wealthy parents would go to such lengths to enroll their children into college, reportedly paying one of the ringleaders of the bribery scandal, William Singer, approximately $25 million since 2011 (Medina et al., 2019). The media often touts that college is an investment—one that is important insofar as its return on investment can exceed the expenses of attendance (Kulp, 2018). Simultaneously, media outlets
report that students who wish to see stable, professional employment should attend trade or professional schools (Coudriet, 2018). In other words, a dominant narrative about the importance of higher education (from trade school to elite Ivy League) is that enrollment is a matter of purchasing the ability to acquire the knowledge or skills needed to secure stable, professional employment. However, if the purpose of college were solely, or even principally, about the learning of content, and using that knowledge to show one’s qualification for employment, then certainly these families could have sought an education at a strong, albeit less selective, university. The fact that these families spent tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands of dollars bribing their way into highly selective universities suggests there is something beyond the content knowledge of higher education that is accrued through college—and accumulated at highly selective colleges in ways that are impossible at other, less selective, institutions.

We draw upon the work of the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2011; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) to assert that higher education’s role in society is not solely about helping students acquire knowledge/skills that can be parlayed into professional employment. Rather, higher education also functions as a site for accruing social (i.e., forming relationships) and cultural (i.e., acquiring the tastes, habits, or dispositions of a class) capital in the interest of maintaining class hierarchies. Our argument draws attention to Sprague’s (1992) question, “Why do schools exist?” (p. 5), where she argues that scholarship that only speaks to the effectiveness of learning course content cannot address if doing so ameliorates or exacerbates inequitable social relationships (see also Sprague 1993, 1994, 2002, 2016). We note that in the more than 25 years since her essay, the preponderance of communication and instruction scholarship continues to focus on how instructors can best address the relationships among classroom management, relationship-building, and learning within and beyond the classroom space (see Houser & Hosek, 2017) without any sustained attention to the ways that higher education functions to (re)produce a class-caste system. The emergence of Critical Communication Pedagogy scholarship (CCP; Fassett & Rudick, 2016, 2018; Fassett & Warren, 2007) offers the opportunity for a corrective by providing a language to understand the connections between mundane, everyday communication and social inequality; however, it lacks a framework to address higher education as an institutional entity. As Rudick (2017) asserted, institutions of higher education are one of the linchpins between everyday practices and the discourses that shape and constrain communication behaviors, and require a unique language to address them as organizational structures (see also Fassett & Rudick, 2018). Overall, we argue that scholarship needs to address mainstream communication and instruction scholarship’s neglect of social inequality while enhancing CCP by offering heuristic vocabulary for institutional analysis.

To that end, we explore how students at a public, 4-year university identify and navigate the social structure of higher education and how they communicatively (re)produce socializing norms. In doing so, we abandon the psychosocial and cybernetic traditions that have largely dominated communication and instruction research in favor of sociocultural and critical frameworks (see Craig, 1999). Specifically, we first draw upon the work of Bourdieu to outline a critical communication pedagogical understanding of institutional socialization (Bourdieu, 2011; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Fassett & Warren, 2007). We then report results from focus groups with college students to understand their perceptions of the communicative behaviors, norms, and attitudes of higher education. Subsequently, we discuss the importance of their perceptions of social and cultural capital, connect their ascriptions to the
(re)production of existing social relationships, and advocate for a renewed focus on seemingly innocuous communication and instruction concepts and variables in light of our findings. Finally, we offer ways for instructors to intervene into the socialization process through by making the culture of power visible to all educational participants (Delpit, 1988).

**Bourdieu, education, and socialization**

Bourdieu is perhaps one of the most influential twentieth century sociologists (Lamont, 2012; Navarro, 2006). Although known for his work on a range of topics, including art, history, and ethnography, he is best known for his philosophical and empirical contributions to the study of education. Specifically, his conceptualizations of capital (i.e., economic, social, and cultural), habitus, and field of experience offer a compelling account for how institutional logics serve to shape and constrain the consciousness of members within an institution (i.e., socialization). In short, he argued that students succeed in higher education largely due to their ability to internalize (i.e., understand) and externalize (e.g., perform correctly) knowledge that reflects the language, tastes, habits, and dispositions of the political and economic elite (Bourdieu, 1999; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). In this section, we offer an in-depth explication of this theory and conclude by addressing how his framework informs our current study.

**Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) argued that there are three types of capital. First, *economic capital*, which “is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (p. 82). Second, *cultural capital*, which refers to the goods, services, and behaviors that characterize the dominant modes of interaction in a given context. Cultural capital comprises three components: *embodied capital* (i.e., the [non-] verbal norms of a context); *objectified capital* (i.e., books, musical instruments, or art); and *institutionalized capital* (i.e., credentials recognized as conferring status or expertise in a context). Finally, *social capital*, which denotes the social connections a person has that can be utilized for advancement within an arena of social life (e.g., being family friends with politician). Important to Bourdieu is the notion that cultural and social capital, although not reducible to economic capital, can be converted or exchanged for it. For example, having a credentialed higher education degree can be used to obtain professional employment (i.e., cultural capital) or being family friends with a banker may result in a lower interest loan for purchasing a home (i.e., social capital). Capital, within Bourdieu’s work, is accrued, spent, converted, and lost, providing a normative language for inequality within society.

Unfortunately, U.S. scholarship that has adopted Bourdieu’s notion of capital has been plagued by a variety of conceptual and operational issues. As Orr (2003) argued, economic capital is often measured by asking participants their individual or family income; however, economic capital is best understood through the lens of wealth (particularly intergenerational wealth) that a person can mobilize or use as a result of their lineage (e.g., owning a home, car, stock, or property). Vryonides (2007) offered that cultural capital has often been measured by survey instruments focusing on objectified capital (e.g., “how many books do you own?”) or institutionalized capital (e.g., “what are your parents’ highest level of education?”), resulting in the relative neglect in understanding...
embodied cultural capital. Moreover, Lamont and Lareau (1988; see also Lamont, 2012) asserted that many of the survey instruments used to measure cultural capital are based on Bourdieu’s work in France (e.g., “how often do you attend the opera?”), but may not be appropriate to understand the cultural capital of U.S. society. Foley and Edwards (1999) argued that many scholars have conceptualized social capital as an individual’s ability to integrate into normative structures (e.g., “I feel like I am a part of my organization’s culture;” see Coleman, 1988) or as a form of social trust (e.g., “I know that when I loan a friend money, they will pay me back;” see Putnam, 2000). These approaches to social capital are conceptually at odds with Bourdieu’s assertion that social capital is a structural imposition in service of inequity (see Townley, 2014 for a review).

At stake in many of the conversations about defining capital (particularly social and cultural capital) is how scholars frame the causes of, and solutions for, inequality. When cultural capital is operationalized as reading books, going to cultural centers (e.g., the museum), or obtaining a degree; the implications are that inequality is simply the result of individuals who are either unwilling or ignorant of what they should do in order to become part of the dominant class (Vryonides, 2007). Similarly, when research frames social capital as the ability to integrate into, or trust others within, normative structures; it assumes that the failure to do so is the reason for inequality (Foley & Edwards, 1999; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In other words, some forms of scholarship on cultural or social capital assume a deficit narrative, where individuals’ lack of economic mobility is due to their own shortcomings (Yosso, 2005). In contrast, Bourdieu’s work points to the realization that conflict is not a byproduct of societal misalignment; rather, it is a central organizing principle of any society. Social and cultural capital are unevenly distributed—not due to individuals’ failure to act rationally—but because what counts as capital shifts and morphs to protect the economic interests of elites. What clothes to wear, products to buy, language to use, schools to attend, music to listen to, each of these examples and more continuously change, ensuring that there is always a fund of social and cultural capital that cannot be accessed by most people in a given society. In short, Bourdieu’s work stresses the need to identify social and cultural capital, not so it can be unreflexively mimicked or taken up, but as a way to intervene into and challenge those systems.

Field of experience, habitus, and socialization

The field of experience (or “field”) refers to the institutional context of a given set of cultural and normative practices (Bourdieu, 1984). As Navarro (2006) wrote, to Bourdieu “the social world can be conceptualized as a series of relatively autonomous but structurally homologous fields of production, circulation and consumption of various forms of cultural as well as material resources” (p. 14). In other words, a set of practices within each institutional context constitutes a field (e.g., religion, educational, governmental, and familial) and those practices are unique to each field (e.g., taking tests in educational institutions). Although there practices that are not necessarily 1:1 transferrable to other fields (e.g., there are few opportunities for high stakes, multiple-choice tests for professional employment), the fields are homologous in the sense that the skills, habits, or dispositions do have some level of transfer (e.g., acceding to authority, sitting still for long stretches of time, or working without talking to others) from one context to the other. Each institutional system is also hierarchical—that is, each person’s ability or willingness
to take up and perform correctly the normative structures of the system are relative to their success. Simultaneously, institutions have a limited amount of symbolic and material resources—not everyone can be the CEO or president of the organization. As a result, institutions, by their very nature, are characterized (in perception if not reality) by a zero-sum game logic (i.e., institutions have a finite amount of resources, titles, or rewards) that encourages institutional member competition.

A person inhabits many fields over the course of their life, some simultaneously (e.g., family, religion, and education) while others are hierarchical and processional (e.g., preschool, grade school, secondary education). A person is inducted into a field, often through some sort of ceremony by a person of authority or esteem (e.g., approval of an application; Bourdieu, 1984, 1992). Upon acceptance, individuals will develop a sense of what is considered normal, natural, or acceptable within a given context (i.e., cultural capital) and change their behaviors to navigate (i.e., take up, defer, reject, or perpetuate) those codes of conduct in forming relationships with others within the context (i.e., social capital). The development of cultural and social capital and, in particular, the way that an individual begins to understand those codes and norms as natural is captured in Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus. The habitus refers to “the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality,” that is, the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions (Wacquant, 2005, p. 318). The concept of the habitus points the interplay of structured (i.e., the traditions of a given context) and structuring (i.e., how individuals communicatively perform those traditions) social action that generates institutional and individual identity. Over time, individuals become organizationally attuned, and begin to view life beyond the context of the institution through their institutional identity (although, certainly, there is room for contestation, see Mumby, 2005).

As Bourdieu noted, creating an institutional identity extends beyond the confines of the institutional space, signaling how the development of a habitus for a given field socializes institutional members into societal norms (Mumby, 2005). Socialization refers to the process by which individuals navigate the generative and restrictive features of norm-oriented attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors within a given context, internalizing institutional norms as good, normal, or necessary or, through failure to adhere to those codes, risk harming their prospects for success within the institution. For example, a fan of a university’s sports team may identify the traditions of a field (e.g., wearing certain colors in support of their team), begin to internalize and perform them (e.g., understands wearing those colors to games as normal and appropriate), and then, over time, perform that set of behaviors outside of the context (e.g., wear team colors in a variety of contexts to show loyalty) connecting them both to the sports team and cultural norms about athletics, consumerism, and competition. In this way, institutions are central sites for codifying (and rewarding/punishing) sets of societal rules and norms, and for individuals to practice those codes until they are internalized as normal. Overall, an examination of institutions is important because they are the linchpins between individuals’ everyday communicative lives and the cultural milieus in which they inhabit.

**Rationale**

Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, field, and habitus provide a clear framework for understanding the process of socialization within higher education. Individuals transition
from one institutional context (e.g., K–12 or workplace) into a new one (i.e., higher education). Upon arrival, they find out that previously accrued social and cultural capital are similar in some ways and different in others (i.e., those contexts are homologous). As a result, if they wish to be successful, they have to understand the new habitus and connect their existing habitus to the new habitus, a process that will at first often be laborious and explicit early in their time in the organization but will fade and become intuitive and commonsensical by the time they graduate.

A central tenet of Bourdieu’s theory is that individuals will always seek to maximize material and symbolic results, or that all social action is interested (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). That is, students will—consciously and unconsciously—try to maximize their resources within a given field through their communicative choices within and beyond the classroom. In this way, Bourdieu’s theory adheres to what Sprague (1992), drawing on Lukes (1974), describes as a critical approach of power—one that focuses on how institutional members’ attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors about or for success (i.e., their interested social actions) are shaped by the institutional culture of higher education. That is, the exercise of power is based on consent to domination (e.g., hegemony) and does not necessarily rely on compliance-gaining techniques or conflict (see Gramsci, 1988; Mumby, 1997). As such, the present study investigates students’ creation of an institutional habitus (i.e., the internalization and externalization of institutional norms) based on their perceptions of what constitutes those communicative strategies useful in obtaining embodied cultural and social capital. Thus, we asked the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What communicative reasoning and behaviors characterize students’ **embodied cultural capital** within higher education?

**RQ2:** What communicative reasoning and behaviors characterize students’ **social capital** within higher education?

**Method**

**Participants and institutional context**

After receiving IRB approval, we conducted focus groups of five to seven participants for a total of 36 participants (18 males and 18 females) at a medium-sized, public Midwestern university. Student racial/ethnic identification was white (n = 29), black (n = 4), and Latinx/Hispanic (n = 3). Student rank was first year (n = 28), sophomore (n = 4), junior (n = 2), and senior (n = 2). Student demographic data was collected using a short, written survey administered at the end of the focus group.

Participants’ institutional context was a public, 4-year university. The demographic data indicate that the median family income of the institution’s student body is approximately $94,000, and 38% of the student body is made of the top 20% of income earners in the state. Furthermore, the data on the university indicate that 33% of those who attend the university are in the top 20% of the income earners in the state, suggesting that the significant number of those who attend the university are from, and those who graduate land into, middle-/upper-class lifestyles. Based on this information, we conclude that the institutional context of this public, 4-year university is dominated by a habitus that reflects, and (re)produces, the upper-/middle-class position of students who attend.
Participants were recruited through two types of courses. The first was the Liberal Arts Core Speech Communication course. This course was chosen because all students must enroll in the course, a variety of majors (or future majors) would be represented, and the majority of the students in the class would be first year and sophomores (ensuring participants early in their socialization process). The second course was the Liberal Arts Core Capstone course, which is variety of courses taught in a range of different departments. This course was chosen because all students must enroll in one of the courses to graduate, a variety of majors would be represented, and the majority of the students in the class would be juniors and seniors (ensuring participants later in their socialization process). Recruitment was conducted over three semesters. Members of the research team contacted faculty members for each class and gained permission to recruit at the beginning/end of a class. Members attended each class and passed out study information materials. Students self-selected into the study by noting consent on their form, and providing contact information to arrange the focus group dates/times.

Procedures

To understand participants’ accounts of their navigation of higher education, we utilized focus group methods. Focus groups are justified when it is important that participants can interact with one another, encourage others to respond, and generate answers that they may not be able to in a one-on-one interview setting (see Krueger & Casey, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). In our case, we felt it would be necessary to utilize focus groups that comprised students of all class rank (i.e., first year, sophomore, junior, and senior) because (1) beginning institutional members (i.e., first-year students) would have explicit, and recent, knowledge of navigating the new norms of higher education, but have less breadth of experiences due to their short term in the institution and (2) experienced institutional members (i.e., sophomores, juniors, and seniors) would have a greater breadth of knowledge, but their navigation would have become increasingly commonsensical to them due to socialization. Although focus groups comprising participants of various ranks, participants reported their rank on the demographic survey at the end of the focus group and did not reveal their status to each other while engaged in cross-talk. We purposely withheld student rank information to reduce the likelihood that beginning students would automatically defer to experienced students during conversation due to their perceived expertise or knowledge. Additionally, the moderator asked follow-up, probing, and scheduled questions to various members within each group to ensure that every participant was given a chance to start the conversation (i.e., minimizing the likelihood that one voice could dominate the group). These practices ensured that a range of viewpoints from students within the focus groups were expressed and that cross-talk among participants provided the best opportunity for them to remember and recount their experiences.

The first 15 minutes of the focus group was spent building up participant and moderator rapport through conversation and light refreshments. The same moderator (first author) directed all focus groups. After sensing that the classmates felt at ease, the moderator asked a series of semistructured questions, such as “Do any of you remember the first time you interacted with a professor? How did you feel? What was it about?” and “When you interact with an instructor, do any of you adjust the way to you normally
interact? If so, why and how?” Participants were encouraged to talk with one another, while the moderator asked follow-up, clarifying, and probing questions (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Saturation was met in the first four focus groups, and two more groups were conducted for validation of previously generated themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Focus groups lasted 61–76 minutes and were audio-recorded. Research team members created a 126-page single-spaced transcript based on the audio files. Pseudonyms were created for all participants to protect confidentiality.

Data analysis

To begin the data analysis, we read and listened to the transcripts multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the texts. Three members of the research team then, separately, read through the data to create a list of codable phrases based on our research questions. We then met to reconcile our lists of codable phrases through consensus, which produced 287 codable phrases. Next, we, separately, engaged in focused coding (Charmaz, 2000; Saldaña, 2013) to create our initial categories. Focused coding is appropriate when “the goal ... is to develop categories without distracted attention ... to their dimensions and properties” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 213). In other words, focused coding creates broad metacategories, which can be used to group similar data into large groups. We used two concepts (i.e., embodied cultural capital and social capital) to guide us in putting the data into the metacategories.

After saturating each category with data, we then compared the data to itself within each group to generate the dimensions and properties of each thematic concept through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then met to reconcile our data in the initial categories through consensus, and from those initial categories created our codebook. We went back through the data with the codebook, putting all data into generated categories. We generated two metacategories (based on the two concepts of cultural and social capital), four categories, and eight subcategories. All of the data were used, demonstrating a good fit between it and the generated thematic codes.

Results

In this section, we detail the reasoning and behaviors that participants described as characterizing the embodied cultural capital (RQ1) and social capital (RQ2) of their institutional context. Participants’ responses demonstrate how the interplay between their individual social actions and the institutional culture that they navigate (i.e., habitus), has resulted in an orientation toward an institutional identity (i.e., socialization).

Embodied cultural capital in higher education

Embodied cultural capital in higher education refers to participants’ perceptions of the appropriate, good, or normal institutional reasoning and behaviors that constitute the student role. Institutional reasoning for embodied cultural capital refers to the mental frameworks and logics that guide student role behaviors. In other words, they constitute the reasons participants gave to justify their communicative choices in higher education. Institutional behaviors of embodied cultural capital denotes the communicative actions
participants believed characterized their role-oriented activities. In short, they are what participants thought a student should do or avoid if they wished to be perceived as a good student, and would be institutionally rewarded (e.g., higher grades).

**Institutional reasoning for embodied cultural capital**

Institutional reasoning comprises the justifications offered for institutional behaviors, which are characterized by three primary beliefs for communicative actions. The first form of institutional reasoning was **reciprocity**, or the idea that students should perform role-oriented activities or avoid others to induce instructors to match their efforts with role-specific institutional resources (e.g., instructors’ time, attention, or guidance). Jeremiah stated, “I guess the more I participate in class, the more the professors like me, the more they want to talk to me.” Similarly Rob asserted:

> It’s very important to be engaged and show if you’re paying attention and stuff because it’s important. And, for like discussion, it’s also super important to do that because the teacher really sees that and actually pays attention to that stuff.

Lucy cautioned against appearing distracted or not paying attention, offering:

> I feel that if you are on your phone, or they see that you are always in your phone, they will be less likely to help you when you ask for help because, “Well, you haven’t been paying attention so why am I going to waste my time when you are not putting the effort?”

Other students echoed this sentiment. For example, Haley asserted, “You’ll be able to ask more questions” and Jessica stated, “If they notice you weren’t paying attention, they might not help you.” Participants adhered to an implied social contract that if they performed their role adequately, that instructors would reciprocate by offering a matching amount of institutional resources (e.g., their time, attention, and/or guidance).

Another form of institutional reasoning was encapsulated in the idea of **taking responsibility**. For these participants, an important characteristic of being a college (rather than high school student) was connected to the idea that adults take responsibility for their own choices or mistakes and that doing so was something instructors would recognize and reward. Jessica, for example, stated “Definitely coming [to class] on time. If you are going to be late, tell them. I mean if it’s a 50-minute class try to go to the bathroom beforehand. Like, we’re adults. You can hold your pee for 40 minutes.” Ralph echoed her assertion, stating “Showing up on time or if showing up late apologizing for it” was an important part of being responsible. Kenny, in describing a violation of taking responsibility recounted:

> I’ve seen a few people that I know who, when they do bad, they don’t blame it on themselves. They put the blame on others. I’ve seen that really irritate professors and they’ve got a really rocky relationship with that professor.

In Kenny’s example, not taking ownership of one’s errors is a violation of a students’ role and can “irritate professors.” In short, participants believed that taking responsibility for one’s actions was met with respect, if not support, from their instructors.

The final form of institutional reasoning generated through participants’ responses was **prioritizing effort**. Participants believed that the time and energy they had to perform their role of student adequately were limited, and that their courses were all drawing from a
zero-sum amount of resources. As such, they asserted that they conserved their energy in their general education or nonmajor class classes, so they could perform well in classes that directly connected to their interests or ambitions. Mika made this point when she claimed, “Gen eds are significantly different from major classes. Because major classes, I feel like the professor knows you want to be there, because that’s your thing, that’s what you’re into.” For many participants, the idea that general education requirements were a drain or did not merit an expenditure of role-related resources, whereas major courses were, was apparent. Nick characterized his feelings, “I really hate to admit it, but I will admit to having had the mindset of ‘Oh, this is just a LAC, not going to see this professor ever again,’ that kind of thing.” As Jeremiah stated, “When you go into major classes you have to pay attention if you want to be successful in your career, and so everything’s a little higher stakes.” Implied his statement is the juxtaposition between major classes (e.g., higher stakes) and general education courses (e.g., lower stakes). Overall, students’ institutional reasoning for embodied cultural capital is characterized by a sort of means-end rationality that seeks to maximize returns on their investments of resources, with the idea that doing so will help them secure postgraduation employment.

**Institutional behaviors of embodied cultural capital**

Institutional behaviors (students’ role-oriented institutional actions) were characterized by four activities. The first behavior was to make deferential requests of instructors (i.e., requests that did not threaten the hierarchical distinction between student-instructors). This behavior was most apparent when participants requested corrections of instructor decisions as information-seeking to maintain deference and respect. This approach was best captured in one exchange:

Dylan: We had a quiz and there was a question they said I got wrong, but I knew it was right .... And so, I sent my professor an email and I tried to be nice about it because I didn’t want to come off like “Hey, you’re wrong,” so I was like “Hey, I was just wondering if you could change that, or have a look at it, just you know, and let me know if it was actually right or not? Because this is how I read it out of the book.”

Moderator: But, you knew you had the right answer?

Dylan: Yeah.

Moderator: So why did you ask like that then?

Dylan: As a courtesy, because I didn’t want to feel like, you know, “I’m right and you’re a doctor and you’re wrong,” but more of a formal like, “Hey, you probably just clicked the wrong thing and I just wanted to make you aware of that, because you probably wouldn’t know unless someone told you.”

Dylan’s approach was to ask for clarification on an assignment—not because he actually desired or needed it, but because he felt that doing so offered deference to the instructor’s role. This approach was endorsed by other members of the focus group. Jessica stated,

I’ve never told a professor that they were wrong, but I have definitely asked for clarification because it wasn’t as high as it should’ve been .... There’s definitely a way to go about it so you’re nicer and you’re more likely to get it.

Here she describes the approach was the least threatening way to obtain her goal (i.e., to have the error corrected and given back their points). Sarah echoed this statement,
asserting, “The best way to approach them to prove you’re right is to ask questions … So, ‘How did I miss this? How is that incorrect or something?’ And they would be able to see their error.” Overall, students who engaged in this behavior did so because they felt that it was the most effective way to obtain their goals of changing their grade and causing the least amount of conflict.

The second behavior that participants described was wearing proper attire. In these instances, participants named the type of clothing or personal care they believed signaled professionalism and interest in the course, coupled with the expectation that wearing it (or not) would be recognized by instructors as role-appropriate. For some students, it was a general injunction for dressing in ways they believed were professional. For example, Rob said, “I feel like it is important to look professional to your professors. That might give you some more respect or something.” Jessica also asserted, “I would never wear my pajamas to class or anything. Or at least like comb your hair. Like give some effort so like you didn’t just look like you just woke up.” And, Lucy echoed her belief, stating “I agree with you, making yourself look like you want to be there. Please take a shower. Try.” Other participants believed that their attire had implications beyond the class they were enrolled in at the time. For example, Kristin stated, “In a small intimate meeting with someone important or something about your major, you should look nicer because it’s something more important.” Kenny described business majors (who he perceived as often dressing better than the average student) as: “It’s just practicing, I guess, but yeah. That’s probably the best way of saying it. They’re practicing for a career where they have to be at least business casual and presentable and respectful.” Jeremiah recounted a common phrase in relation to the conversation, asserting, “Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.” Participants believed that the importance of wearing appropriate attire had both immediate and long-term benefits, and that those students who dressed in ways that violated role expectancies (e.g., pajamas or torn clothing) were at risk of losing out on institutional resources.

The third institutional behavior that participants talked about was writing formal emails, which placed emphasis on students’ attention to grammar and style when communicating with instructors. For example, Kristin explained, “Make sure you’re formal like say, ‘Hello, whatever they want to be called.’ You have to be using proper grammar. You can’t be, ‘Yo, sup. Will you grade my paper, please,’ because then they’re going to be like ‘Delete.’” Other participants stated that email etiquette “says a lot about the student just based on the way your email is” (Nick) that that emails needed to be “formal” (Graham) at least “until I get to know how they email back and then I start relaxing little bit” (Maddy). As one exchange captured, the content of the email is also important:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paul</th>
<th>When you write an email especially you say your name and what class. I have heard professors tell me how they get email like, “Hey, I am in this class what happened?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>&lt;interjecting&gt; Oh, that’s disrespectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator</td>
<td>Why is that disrespectful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>I don’t want anyone to say that to me, especially when I work my butt off to get my degree, I am trying to teach you all great stuff. And, you ask me “What happened?!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants’ responses indicated that students who paid attention to grammar and style were doing so out of respect for the instructors’ institutional position (i.e., role-oriented communication).

The final institutional behavior dealt with using appropriate honorifics or how students spoke to instructors as institutional members. Participants were quick to acknowledge the variability in how instructors wished to be addressed. Carrie explained, “You call them by professor or doctor, but I have couple professors who are very casual, I call them by their first name. It depends on what professor you have.” Echoing her statement, Kristin asserted, “Some are like, ‘You have to call me doctor because I’m a doctor. I earned this title,’ but then some are like, ‘Hi, my name is Andy. If you need anything, just come talk to me.’” Many participants claimed that it was important to find out how instructors wanted to be addressed as early in the semester as possible. For example, Jeremiah stated, “First day of class, I always ask how they want to be addressed. They’ll be like, ‘Oh, just call me Bob or call me doctor,’ and so that way you know, and so right off the bat there’s no questions.” Others felt that they should always use a formal honorific. Kenny offered, “When it came to dealing with professors, there was a lot more respect in the way, and a formality to it … I have professors who want me to call them by their first name, but I still call them professors.” These responses suggest that participants view using instructors’ honorifics appropriately was an important concern for them. Overall, participants felt they were performing their role as a student correctly and were well practiced for institutional life (and beyond) by engaging in these types of behaviors.

Social capital in higher education

Higher education social capital refers to participants’ perceptions of what are appropriate, good, or normal reasoning and behaviors that establish relationships between instructors and students that can be used for future gain. Institutional reasoning of social capital in higher education social capital, then, includes the mental frameworks and logics that guide students’ pursuit of relationships with instructors. Institutional reasoning constitutes the reasons participants gave to justify their pursuit and maintenance of relationships with instructors. Institutional behaviors for social capital are the actions students said they performed to establish or maintain relationships with instructors and how they used those relationships for rewards. The following sections point to the dimensions and properties of these thematic concepts.

Institutional reasoning of social capital

Institutional reasoning was distinguished by one category, cost–benefit analysis. This form of reasoning was similar to prioritizing effort in that participants believed that the time and energy they had were limited. However, in these responses participants emphasized the time and energy it takes to form a relationship with an instructor (i.e., social capital), rather than on their role of being a student (i.e., cultural capital). For example, Zeke explained

I know I’ll probably have a more personal relationship with [instructors in my major]. I’ll get to know them better than say a professor that I’ll have for one semester. I want to do things that impress them, or get on their good side, you know, do things the way they think it should be done.
Similarly, Madi said, “I mean everyone always tells you that you should get to know [your major instructors] and stuff. So, it’s like, with my general education professor, I’m not going to know them for very long.” For many students, the cost of forming a relationship with instructors who interacted with them on a limited basis (i.e., one semester), particularly in nonmajor classes, was too high to pursue.

Conversely, participants felt that the benefits of forming relationships with instructors within their majors were high. Kate stated:

I am an elementary education major and definitely with the professors in my major, I have more motivation to get to know them better because since they are connected to the college they are better to use for references in the future and stuff, so it’s more of an incentive to get to know them.

Kate’s sentiment—to build relationships with major instructors because “they are better to use for references” signals a clear instrumental rationality to her interactions. Other participants echoed her assertion. For example, Jeremiah described why it was important that a student takes multiple classes from the same instructor: “You start to develop your future career here by making relationships and everything’s important.” Additionally, Mark offered, “You have to, I guess keep in contact with your professor in order for that relationship to develop.” Kenny noted, “If you were going to walk up to me and be super demanding about something [then I would say,] ‘Heck no, you’re not going to get it.’” In short, participants engaged in a cost–benefit analysis rationality, where the relationships they formed with instructors were structured by their existing resources and perceived benefits.

**Institutional behaviors for social capital**

Institutional behaviors were characterized by two categories. The first, *paying in*, describes how students engaged in behaviors that they believed would initiate or maintain a positive relationship with an instructor. Julia summed up this perspective best when she stated, “If you … don’t establish that relationship with you and the professor, it’s going to be really hard to ask for anything.” Drake believed students sometimes went too far to build relationships in the classroom. He offered, “I feel like people will almost like change their views just so they can relate just to get brownie points …. They are just like trying to relate and trying to become their friend.” Others avoided potential conflicts with instructors to maintain cordial relationships. As Rob described, “I was too scared to go talk to the teacher about how I thought this was graded unfairly because I thought that it would hurt the overall relationship if she didn’t see what I saw.” Similarly, Madi avoided using email to contact her instructors because she believed it was less personal. She asserted “I think talking in person is easier and I think that it almost builds kind of a relationship. So, they will be like ‘Okay, that person actually talked to me.’ Like, they care.” Additionally, Haley asserted the importance of visiting instructors during office hours. She said, “I have gone to only two professors’ office hours. My relationship with those two professors are much stronger than [my relationship with] the rest of the professors.” In short, participants believed interactions were not simply about respecting the student-teacher role, but that creating a relationship across those positions would bring benefits in the future. Behaviors such as talking face to face or meeting outside of class were ways they could stand out from their peers and form a one-on-one relationship with their instructors.
The second category, *cashing out*, refers to how students believed they could use the established relationship with an instructor to obtain a goal or reward. For some participants, their relationships were shaped by their desire to obtain a higher grade in the course. For example, Louise stated:

Ask questions because at the end of the year you got that C+, a 79, and they remember that you actually tried in class and they might bump it up to an 80. So, get to know them even if you’re not interested and you could care less. Just pretend like you care. It’s kind of mean, but you know.

For Louise, building a relationship was important insofar as it related to her grade. Other participants named different resources they felt a relationship could give access to. Dylan, who wanted her work showcased in the university’s theater productions, stated:

I’ve always tried to show in class that “I can work hard in class so then if you give me a big design role, I will also work hard in that and do my best.” For a lot of the arts that’s very important, to really get off on the right foot. Because otherwise you won’t really get anywhere.

Some participants believed that their relationships with instructors would provide them access to professional employment. For example, Zeke encapsulated this belief when he stated:

The more relationships you establish with people now, like especially in your major, those are people you might be able to fall back on later in life if you come across an issue that you don’t necessarily know how to handle, you can ask the people who you learned from and if they have any ideas on how a certain problem can be fixed or something like that.

Other participants described a desire to obtain recommendation letter or have contacts for reference letters. As Jessica explained she was “nice to teachers” reasoning, “I don’t want to say that I have made it my mission, but … you’re going to need references, recommendation letters, that sort of what I mean.” For these participants, relationships with instructors provided immediate and long-term benefits, and should be cultivated when possible.

**Discussion**

In this study, we drew upon the critical empirical work of Pierre Bourdieu to understand the ways that higher education functions as a socializing field for students. In doing so, we presented ways that students experienced a public, 4-year university as a unique field, one that contains specific forms of embodied cultural capital and social capital. In addressing RQ1, we showcased participants’ institutional reasoning (i.e., reciprocity, taking responsibility, and prioritizing effort) and behaviors (i.e., make deferential requests, attire, writing formal emails, and honorifics) that characterized their attempts to accumulate embodied cultural capital. Similarly, we addressed RQ2 by revealing participants’ institutional reasoning (i.e., cost–beneﬁt analysis) and behaviors (i.e., paying in and cashing out) that characterized their attempts to accumulate social capital. Participants’ responses indicated that a great deal of their interactions within higher education are structured by and reproductive of the institutional habitus, and shaped by their desire to be consecrated as worthy, ready, or deserving of the next field in their lives (i.e., professional employment). In this section, we detail what these findings indicate for communication and instruction theorizing as well as offer pedagogical advice for instructors.
**Theoretical implications**

The present study highlights how the students’ navigation of the institution’s communicative norms, rules, and codes provides insights into both the generative (e.g., it offers new ways for students to act or reasoning) and restrictive (e.g., it curtails some ways of acting or reasoning) elements of their socialization process. They believed that higher education was markedly different from their high school experiences in terms of responsibility, rewards, and relationships based on their role-oriented behaviors and relationships with instructors. Furthermore, the findings indicate that participants understood the field of higher education as homologous to professional life; that is, that they trust that success within the present field (particularly in their major classes) would influence their ability to obtain professional employment postgraduation. As such, the findings highlight participants’ ascriptions of the “values, common sense, beliefs, behaviors, and taken-for-granted positions as situated within historical and contemporary social relations” (Byrd, 2019, p. 194). That is, students’ reasoning and behaviors are characterized by the logics of a calculating, risk-adverse, and discerning economic actor, one whose interactions within a public, 4-year university institution are bent toward maximizing their investment and maintaining/enhancing their families’ class position (i.e., professional employment status). Overall, participants’ responses suggest that many of their (un)conscious actions while enrolled are shaped and constrained by their institutional membership.

This study contributes to understanding communicative dimensions of embodied cultural capital within higher education. A great deal of research concerning cultural capital has often overlooked embodied cultural capital (i.e., the [non-] verbal norms of a context) in favor of objectified (i.e., books, musical instruments, or art) and institutionalized (i.e., credentials recognized as conferring status or expertise in a context) forms of cultural capital (Vryonides, 2007). Methodologically, this makes sense as the latter two forms of capital lend themselves easier to survey-based research that dominated the U.S. appropriation of Bourdieu’s work (Lamont, 2012). However, this type of research does not take into consideration Bourdieu’s thesis that cultural capital is made material through social practice within a particular field (Vryonides, 2007) nor does it account for the unique cultural context of the U.S. as opposed to Bourdieu’s native France (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). By generating the thematic concepts of institutional reasoning and behaviors of embodied cultural capital, the present study provides a field-specific analysis of students’ perceptions of the present norms and codes of interaction within a public, 4-year university. In doing so, the findings of the study contribute to scholars’ understanding of the types of interactional reasoning and behaviors that characterize students’ understanding of their role within the institution.

Additionally, this study extends research within the Bourdieuan approach to social capital. Scholars who conceptualize social capital as individuals’ ability to integrate into normative structures or as a form of social trust misrecognize the way that students’ communicative interactions with instructors are shaped and constrained by institutional, cultural, and economic concerns (see Foley & Edwards, 1999; Townley, 2014). As a result, their work downplays how social actors are networked within a particular institution in relation to one another (i.e., hierarchical), interested (i.e., oriented toward maximizing material or symbolic results), and performed within a field that they perceive as zero-
sum (i.e., their behaviors give them as greater/lesser chance of accessing a finite pool of resources, such as grade or letters of recommendation). The present study, by focusing on both the institutional reasoning and behaviors of social capital, provides insights into how students understand their actions as a sort of necessary evil; that is, many lamented having to form inauthentic relationships with instructors while simultaneously acknowledging the need to form them to accrue social, and eventually economic, capital. This finding suggests that students are not simply Machiavellian in their interactions with instructors (although, certainly some may be); rather it indicates both the generative and restrictive functions of higher education culture, and how students (un)consciously perform their norm-oriented, role-based communication in the belief that it will maximize their current or future rewards (e.g., grades or professional employment).

Finally, and related to the previous contribution, is the way that the Bordieuan framework provides novel insights that extends both CCP as well as traditional communication and instruction literature. First, it develops an approach to institutional analysis that is currently undertheorized in CCP scholarship (Fassett & Warren, 2007). As Fassett and Rudick (2018) argued, CCP research has often “fail[ed] to situate findings in the context of the political-economy that characterizes our historic moment” (p. 13) due to a lack of emphasis on the connections between institutions and the capitalist economy. The present study addresses this by connecting the perceptions of students in an institutional context which is designed to help middle-/upper-class students maintain their class position. Students’ reasoning and behaviors are bent toward (though not determined), and (re)productive of, the cultural belief that their time in higher education is an investment toward maintaining their families’ class position (i.e., professional employment status). Institutions of higher education, then, provide the linchpin between the cultural values of individualism, competition, and market-rationality of late-capitalism and students’ everyday communicative behaviors and reasoning as they navigate the context.

Additionally, this study extends traditional instructional scholarship, which is based on a process–product, stimulus–response, or cue–arousal approach to communication (Rudick & Golsan, 2014; Sprague, 1992). In these models, students’ reasoning and behaviors are viewed primarily as the result of psychological traits, states, and dispositions and the goal of communication research is to uncover the most effective ways to interact in order to secure a well-managed learning environment (e.g., use immediacy or affinity-seeking behaviors). A Bordieuan approach, drawing upon sociocultural and critical traditions, foregrounds the discursive forces that shape and constrain communication within a hierarchical institution and, as such, draws different insights when explaining students’ behaviors. Within this framework, there is no student activity that is not, on some level, influenced by the institutional habitus that promotes an economic rationality (i.e., student-as-consumer, see McMillan & Cheney, 1996). That is, all students engage in communication that is interested, in the sense that their behaviors and reasons are always bent toward maximizing present or future rewards within the system (although, their tactics are not always successful). This assertion draws attention to the intimate ties among the economic, cultural, and communicative systems students navigate in their interactions with instructors, and provides explanations for student behavior that is contextual and rooted in the historic moment they operate within (i.e., late-capitalism, see Flew, 2014) rather than relying solely on explanations rooted in sociopsychological language (e.g.,
learning vs. grade oriented; see Gorham, 1990). In short, this lens drives home Sprague’s (1992) argument that without a careful and considered understanding communication within educational contexts, there remains the real possibility that effective instructional practices only assist in making the (re)production of inequality more efficient.

**Pedagogical implications**

Critical approaches to theorizing education are characterized by two competing impulses. On the one hand is the desire to engage in revolutionary, even utopian, thinking as a way to expand the ontological and epistemological horizons of what can be and what can be known. The danger of this ethic, though, is creating scholarship that is so abstracted from everyday life as to be useless in guiding practice. On the other hand is the effort to ground pedagogical advice into solutions, tips, and rubrics. However, the danger in this ethic lies in deskilling instructors and students, stripping them of autonomy and creativity by reducing critical theory to mere *techne*. Critical communication pedagogy, in holding these dialectical impulses in tension, provides a useful vocabulary for theorizing the pedagogical dimensions of the present study (see Fassett & Rudick, 2016, 2018; Fassett & Warren, 2007).

Higher education functions, as do other institutions within a late-capitalist economy, to organize human activity toward hierarchically managed ends (Mumby, 2005). As such, the question of what type of society one wants is intimately tied into what kind of institutions anchor those ideals into day-to-day practices. Currently, students are placed within highly stratified institutions; stratified further into majors, class rank, and clubs; and have their livelihoods structured (though not determined) by a nearly never-ending stream of (sometimes not-) well-intentioned adults whose primary concern is codified best in the most innocuous phrase “What do you want to be when you grow up?” As Calarco (2018) notes, parents of middle-/upper-class students encourage their young children to cultivate the habitus of the rational, economic actor at a young age, inculcating them with a variety of communicative tools to maximize their cultural and social capital. The findings of the present study indicate that students have internalized this mantra and have connected their role as students to being economic actors within and beyond higher education.

As such, it is important that instructors, at all levels of education, advocate for a fundamental shift in education away from the social ontology of *homo economicus* (i.e., self-interest and status attainment) and work to actualize education as a site that supports all of parts of human activity and promotes a more robust human experience (see Brown, 2005). We believe that communication instructors are well positioned with our disciplinary language to both identify and challenge the belief that education is only, or principally, important insofar as it is linked to economic gain. As McMillan and Cheney (1996) state, the use of marketplace rationality in discussions about the value of education can overemphasize the product of educational over the process of learning. In our study, we note that none of the participants talked about higher education in terms of novel or challenging ideas or beliefs they encountered, how they planned on coming back to higher education later in life, or how they took coursework because they found something interesting outside of their potential career goals. Rather, students spoke of higher education in almost exclusively instrumental terms, and believed their coursework, role-oriented activities, and relationships with instructors were all, to a
greater or lesser extent, completed in the hope of parlaying their credentialed status (i.e., graduated with a degree) into professional employment. As Nussbaum (2002) notes, human capabilities are not exhaustively defined by one’s work; rather, work is only one condition of many that must be met to ensure that a person’s life is well and fully lived. Communication scholars can play an important role in helping students articulate the importance of interpersonal relationships, humane organizations, aesthetic virtue and play, and intercultural connection to the human experience without justifying their importance by connecting them to the truncated social ontology of late-capitalism.

Although higher education members in general, and communication scholars in particular, can work to change the cultural fabric of the U.S.A. toward a more robust conversation of the value of education, there are ways that instructors can intervene in the (re)production of cultural and social capital on an everyday basis. Instructors may be best served by making the culture of power visible to all educational participants (Delpit, 1988). In other words, instructors should be explicit to students about the ways to develop cultural and social capital within higher education and how to parlay that capital into future rewards. Simultaneously, though, instructors ought to hold those forms of capital up for critical scrutiny, leading students to think about the ways that capitalism, racism, sexism, and other oppressive systems are built and maintained through an unreflexive cultivation of capital. In some ways, this is as simple as being honest with students. For example, many instructors deduct points from assignments if they are turned in late to the instructor. And, yet, a grade is ostensibly a reflection of what one learned and their ability to demonstrate that knowledge—not a measure of their punctuality. Compounding this issue is the often unreflexive justification given for due dates: “In the real world, people won’t let you miss deadlines.” This assertion, often offered without evidence or warrant, is a mystification of the reason most instructors have due dates: it makes it more efficient for them to grade student work. We wish to be clear, we are not advocating for the end of due dates; rather, we are making a larger point that instructors can best fulfill their roles as educators by being transparent about how seemingly mundane, everyday communication with their students plays a role in the (re)production of societal discourses. Being honest with students about their role-oriented communicative behaviors (i.e., cultural capital), their relational dynamics with instructors (i.e., social capital), and the way they adhere (or not) to those norms (i.e., habitus) within higher education (i.e., the field) is perhaps one step to creating a society that appreciates the interconnectivity between everyday life and the (re)production of systemic inequality.

**Limitations and future directions**

The limitations of this research involved the sample of participants. The overrepresentation of white middle-/upper-class students provides both a strength and weakness. On one hand, people from dominant positions know and perform dominant cultural codes, making these participants ideal informants. On the other hand, it is likely that they have internalized those norms, and therefore it is possible that some norms were not uncovered because they are so commonsensical that most participants do not even believe they merit attention. Future scholarship may benefit from an analysis of social and cultural capital from the perspective of students from traditionally oppressed groups to understand their experiences in relation to institutional domination by utilizing
a more explicit intersectional framework (see Crenshaw, 1991). We note that in addition to the organizational communication scholarship used in this study, the field of intercultural communication could contribute to realizing this goal (see Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002). Overall, we believe there are many untapped areas in the communication discipline that communication and instruction scholars can draw upon to showcase our field’s unique perspective on social reality.

Another limitation of this study was the type of institution from which participants were recruited. Based on institutional data, it is likely that students who attend the university are looking to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. It is unlikely that the present study would provide much insight into the social and cultural capital of high-status educational institutions, such as Ivy League universities whose student population comprises primarily of the ultrawealthy or community colleges composed primarily of students from poverty or working-class students. As such, future scholarship should explore the cultural and social capital from other types of institutional contexts to generate a thematically rich portrait of students’ communicative actions.

The final limitation of the study is the use of focus group methodology. Focus groups are appropriate to understand participants’ perceptions, but cannot ascertain if those beliefs are true or not. In other words, participants may believe doing this or not doing that is an important part of being a successful student, but the present study cannot report whether those behaviors are actually rewarded or punished by institutional members (e.g., instructors). Additionally, although the moderator took care to ensure that no participants dominated conversation, and encouraged different members to start conversation for each question, it is possible that more experienced students may have exerted a socializing presence on beginning students (e.g., provided what they believed were the correct answers to mimic or expand upon). Therefore, future scholarship could proceed in three ways. First, ethnographic data would do a better job of understanding the interactions between students and institutional members (e.g., instructors), and could document, in real time, the rewards and punishments used to cultivate students’ identities. Second, survey-based scholarship could generate measurement instruments based on the thematic concepts we have generated in this study and evaluate whether students’ performance of the behaviors, or adherence to the institutional reasoning, shares a relationship with success (within or beyond the institutional context). Third, research utilizing an interview design would eliminate participant cross-talk, and ensure that each participant’s answer was based solely on their own experience. All approaches, by adopting a longitudinal design, could offer insights into the (re)productive functioning of higher education by tracking how participants reasoning and behaviors change over the course of their institutional membership and beyond.

Conclusions

Sprague’s (1992) question, “Why do schools exist?” (p. 5) provides an impetus for communication and instruction scholars to expand their epistemological horizons by moving beyond the narrow set of concerns (i.e., effectiveness) and traditions (i.e., sociopsychological and cybernetic) that have dominated the field. This study’s findings showcase the possibilities of understanding student–teacher communication as connected to, and reproductive of, a cultural, economic, and political moment (see Rudick & Golsan,
And, it hints at the way that traditionally neglected areas of analysis (e.g., the discourse of student-as-consumer, the dwindling resources allocated to higher education, or bureaucratic control of educational life) may alter, or even turn on its head, long-established truths of the field. Our hope is that this study offers a clear argument for how empirically answering unasked questions of our field offers areas of investigation that are rich with potential for scholars of all types, and can offer clear avenues for instructors to identify teaching practices that support a more humane, just form of learning.

Notes

1. This drive is particularly true for STEM careers, where students are encouraged to go into engineering or related fields based on their return on investment (see Humphreys & Kelly, 2014).
2. The citation for the institution’s demographic information was not included to protect confidentiality.

Acknowledgements

The author C. Kyle Rudick would like to thank Carissa Froyum for her comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

Notes on contributors

C. Kyle Rudick (Ph.D., Southern Illinois University) is an associate professor at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50613.

Fernando Ismael Quiñones Valdivia (M.A., University of Northern Iowa) is a doctoral student at Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802.

Lexi Hudachek and Jackson Specker are M.A. graduates of the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50613.

Alan K. Goodboy is a professor at West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506.

References


Sprague, J. (1993). Retrieving the research agenda for communication education: Asking the pedagogical questions that are “embarrassments to theory”. *Communication Education, 42*, 106–122. doi:10.1080/03634529309378919


