

Instructional Communication 8

The Emergence of a Field

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Since its inception, the field of instructional communication has enjoyed a healthy existence. Unlike its related subareas of communication education and developmental communication (Friedrich, 1989), instructional communication is considered to be a unique area of study rooted in the tripartite field of research conducted among educational psychology, pedagogy, and communication studies scholars (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). This tripartite field focuses on the learner (i.e., how students learn affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively), the instructor (i.e., the skills and strategies necessary for effective instruction), and the meaning exchanged in the verbal, nonverbal, and mediated messages between and among instructors and students. As such, the study of instructional communication centers on the study of the communicative factors in the teaching-learning process that occur across grade levels (e.g., K–12, post-secondary), instructional settings (e.g., the classroom, the organization), and subject matter (Friedrich, 1989; Staton, 1989).

Although some debate exists as to the events that precipitated the emergence of instructional communication as a field of study (Rubin & Feezel, 1986; Sprague, 1992), McCroskey and McCroskey (2006) posited that the establishment of instructional communication as a legitimate area of scholarship originated in 1972, when the governing board of the International Communication Association created the Instructional Communication Division. The purpose of the Division was to “focus attention on the role of communication in all teaching and training contexts, not just the teaching of communication” (p. 35), and provided instructional communication researchers with the opportunity to showcase their scholarship at the Association’s annual convention and to publish their research in *Communication Yearbook*, a yearly periodical sponsored by the Association. In 1977, *Communication Yearbook* started the practice of

publishing the top convention papers submitted to the Division as well as an overview chapter devoted to some component of instructional communication (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006). These overview chapters were literature reviews (rather than empirical studies) intended to provide readers with an extensive synthesis of topics such as instructional theory and research (Scott & Wheelless, 1977), learning theory (Lashbrook & Wheelless, 1978), instructional strategies and systems (Wheelless & Hurt, 1979), classroom interaction (Daly & Korinek, 1980), and developmental communication (Van Kleeck & Daly, 1982).

Although this practice was discontinued in 1986 (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006), by this time, instructional communication scholars had obtained another distribution outlet for their scholarship. In 1975, the journal *Speech Teacher* (sponsored by the Speech Communication Association) was renamed *Communication Education* and shifted its solicitation of manuscripts from those aiding instructors of speech communication courses to manuscripts that could “assist teachers of all disciplines and academic levels to apply communication theory and research to classroom teaching and learning” (Sprague, 1993, p. 107). Despite its name, the journal centered largely on the dissemination of instructional communication scholarship and has continued to be the primary research outlet for instructional communication research, a fact that prompted Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax (2001) to suggest that the journal be renamed to embrace its focus on instructional communication research. Supplementing this initial foray into scholarship was the publication in 1978 of the first instructional communication textbook, written by Hurt, Scott, and McCroskey. This textbook not only helped establish the field of instructional communication as a legitimate arena of both teaching and scholarship but also introduced readers (i.e., students, researchers) to several instructional communication variables (e.g., instructor credibility, homophily, and power; student motivation; student communication apprehension) that later morphed into viable lines of instructional communication research, many of which are still studied.

The late 1970s to early 1980s witnessed the birth of the variable-analytic approach to the study of instructional communication—an approach still associated heavily with instructional communication research—which was guided by a heavy reliance on logical empiricism as its philosophical frame (Nussbaum & Friedrich, 2005). This approach centers largely on the identification of particular communicative behaviors, traits, or attributes used by instructors with their students; these behaviors were believed to be linked with students’ reports of their affective, behavioral, or cognitive learning; students’ assessments of their instructors’ positive teaching practices; and students’ perceptions of effective classroom communication management practices (Nussbaum, 1992; Waldeck, Plax, & Kearney, 2009). Exemplars of the research conducted during this time period include the origins of the study of instructor nonverbal immediacy (Andersen, 1979), instructor communicator style (Norton, 1977), instructor humor (Bryant,

Comisky, & Zillmann, 1979), instructor communication concerns (Staton-Spicer & Marty-White, 1981), student communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977), and the “Power in the Classroom” series (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). Furthermore, it was during this time period that instructional communication researchers began their quest to measure quantitatively the variables they were studying (e.g., nonverbal immediacy, communicator style, and power) as well as to measure student affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning (see Waldeck, Plax, & Kearney, Chapter 9, this volume, for a description of the development of learning measures).

These lines of research continued to develop further in the mid-1980s. For example, the study of instructor nonverbal immediacy bore its companion study of instructor verbal immediacy (Gorham, 1988), the study of instructor power gave rise to the emergence of instructor behavior alteration techniques and student resistance (see Chory & Goodboy, Chapter 10, this volume, for a review of these three research lines), the study of instructor communicator style was extended to explore further instructors’ use of dramatic verbal communication behaviors (i.e., humor, self-disclosure, and narratives) (e.g., Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; Javidi, Downs, & Nussbaum, 1988), and the study of communication apprehension continued its exploration of its causes, correlates, and treatments across elementary, secondary, and postsecondary classrooms. During this time, the exploration of student communication competence commenced, and appropriate measures were developed for assessing this construct (Backlund, Brown, Gurry, & Jandt, 1982; Rubin, 1982; Rubin & Graham, 1988).

By the 1990s, several lines of research introduced in the late 1970s to early 1980s (i.e., power, immediacy, and humor) flourished, and newer lines of research emerged. Similar to the research conducted in the 1980s, instructional communication research continued to center primarily on instructor communicative behaviors, traits, or attributes, although a growing interest emerged in the examination of student communication variables (Staton-Spicer & Wulff, 1984; Waldeck et al., 2001). Some of these newer lines of research included instructor aggressive communication (e.g., Myers, 1998), instructor socio-communicative style (e.g., Thomas, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1994; see Martin & Myers, Chapter 4, this volume, for a review of this line), instructor use of affinity-seeking (e.g., McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986) and relevance strategies (e.g., Frymier & Shulman, 1995), instructor misbehaviors (e.g., Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991), student clarifying techniques (e.g., Kendrick & Darling, 1990), student motivation (e.g., Christophel, 1990; Gorham & Millette, 1997), student learner empowerment (e.g., Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996), and student motives to communicate with their instructors (e.g., Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999). Instructor clarity, which originally was studied among educational psychologists, also gained the attention of communication

studies scholars during this time (see Titsworth & Mazer, Chapter 13, this volume, for a review of the development of this construct).

As instructional communication research moved into the first decade of 2000, much of the variable analytic research continued. Continued lines of research include the study of instructor power, immediacy, humor, clarity, aggressive communication, self-disclosure, socio-communicative style, and misbehaviors; new lines of research, such as instructor confirmation (e.g., Ellis, 2000) and instructor temperament (e.g., McCroskey, Valencic, & Richmond, 2004), also were introduced. Researchers also began to show an increased interest in the role technology plays in the instructional environment (Lane & Shelton, 2001) by focusing on issues such as distance education, classroom digital technology, e-mail, and social networking sites (Waldeck et al., 2009). From the student perspective, the research conducted on student motives to communicate with their instructors thrived, and a host of new research studies examined the reasons, functions, and correlates of students' out-of-class communication with their instructors (e.g., Bippus, Kearney, Plax, & Brooks, 2003; Jaasma & Koper, 2001). Instructional communication researchers continued to refine their measurement instruments, and the communibiological perspective was introduced as an additional research paradigm through which instructional communication could be studied (see Ayres, 2000, for a special issue on the communibiological perspective).

Across the decades, however, three lines of research retained a high level of visibility. The first line was instructor nonverbal immediacy (see Witt, Schrod, and Turman, Chapter 11, this volume, for a review of the literature), the second line was communication apprehension (see McCroskey & Beatty, 1998), and the third line was instructor credibility. Instructor credibility, which is defined as the "attitude of a receiver which references the degree to which a source is seen to be believable" (McCroskey, 1998, p. 80), exists across three dimensions: (1) competence, which is the extent to which an instructor is considered to be an expert on the subject matter; (2) character, which is the extent to which an instructor is viewed as honest and trustworthy; and (3) caring, which is the extent to which an instructor is perceived to be concerned about the welfare of students (McCroskey, 1998). Since its initial introduction to the instructional communication setting (McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974), both the conceptualization and the measurement of the instructor credibility construct have evolved extensively (McCroskey & Teven, 1999; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). A meta-analysis conducted by Finn and her colleagues (2009) revealed that perceived instructor credibility is moderately associated with a host of instructor attributes (e.g., sex, sexual orientation, and race), instructor communicative behaviors and traits (e.g., argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, confirmation, and nonverbal immediacy), and student outcomes (e.g., state motivation, affective learning, and cognitive learning). Most recently, Zhang and Sapp (2009) found that instructor burnout has a negative impact on instructor

credibility. Based on these collective findings, it is not surprising that Myers (2001) claimed that instructor credibility is one of the most important variables affecting the instructor-student relationship.

The Chapters

This section of the *Handbook* focuses on some of the most widely studied constructs in the instructional communication domain, many of which date back to the initial research conducted among instructional communication scholars. In Chapter 9, Jennifer Waldeck, Timothy Plax, and Patricia Kearney examine the philosophical and methodological foundations of instructional communication. Building on their earlier work (Waldeck et al., 2001), they begin their chapter by reviewing several prominent lines of research and theoretical frameworks associated with instructional communication research across the content areas of student communication, instructor communication, and instructor-student interaction. These lines of research include communication apprehension and student motivation (i.e., student communication), instructor confirmation and misbehaviors (i.e., instructor communication), and mentoring (i.e., instructor-student interaction). They then identify recent developments that have occurred in the study of instructional communication, which include an increase in researchers' interest in instructor-student interaction, the transfer of traditional instructional communication research to the training and development context, and the proliferation of technology in the learning process. Central to the learning process is the conceptualization and measurement of student affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning, which Waldeck and her colleagues summarize concisely. This summary is followed by two suggestions they recommend instructional communication researchers should heed. The first suggestion centers on the development of theoretical models that succinctly capture the essence and tone of instructional communication; the second suggestion focuses on the exploration of the interfaces between technology use, communication, and learning. By doing so, Waldeck et al. are confident that the contributions made by instructional communication researchers to the field of communication studies will remain heuristic.

In Chapter 10, Rebecca Chory and Alan Goodboy provide a comprehensive chronology of the "Power in the Classroom" series. They begin their chapter with a thorough review of the first two "Power in the Classroom" articles, which introduced French and Raven's (1959, 1968) concept of power bases (i.e., coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent) to the instructional communication setting by identifying the correlates and outcomes associated with each power base. Chory and Goodboy then review the findings of the next five "Power in the Classroom" articles.

In this review, they provide a history and synthesis of the research conducted on the compliance-gaining strategies, which are referred to as behavioral alteration techniques (BATs), used by college instructors, graduate teaching assistants, and K–12 teachers. From this review, they then explore the research conducted on student resistance, which arguably is an attendant of the power research, and how student resistance is linked to students' perceptions of instructor use of BATs, immediacy behaviors, and classroom justice. To aid researchers in their study of power, compliance gaining, and resistance, Chory and Goodboy identify the measures used to assess these constructs. However, as they note, the power and compliance-gaining research has been mired in mild controversy over issues surrounding its measurement. These issues are addressed briefly, as are the strengths, limitations, and future research directions of this body of research. Chory and Goodboy conclude their chapter by challenging instructional communication researchers to continue the theoretical and pragmatically important work conducted to date on the power, compliance-gaining, and resistance classroom communication constructs.

In Chapter 11, Paul Witt, Paul Schrodtt, and Paul Turman examine the extensive body of work conducted on instructor immediacy. After reviewing the development of the nonverbal and the verbal immediacy constructs, they identify the research conducted to date on nonverbal and verbal immediacy with the traditional areas of instructional communication research—namely, the influence of student communication variables (e.g., motivation, empowerment), instructor communication variables (e.g., power, clarity), and student learning (e.g., affective learning, cognitive learning). They also examine whether students' perceptions of instructor immediacy vary across cultures (e.g., China, Germany, Puerto Rico, and Japan, as well as the United States) and classroom settings (e.g., distributed learning environments, use of technology) as well as summarize the designs and measures used in immediacy research. They then synthesize the theoretical explanations that underlie the immediacy construct, pay particular attention to the four theoretical models (i.e., the learning model, the motivation model, the affect model, and the integrated model) that have evolved from immediacy research, and identify the critiques and challenges associated with immediacy research. They conclude their chapter by proposing that researchers examine further the viability of the measurement of verbal immediacy, continue to explore the relationship between immediacy and cognitive learning, and engage in additional testing of theoretical models of immediacy and learning. By doing so, Witt and colleagues contend that instructional communication researchers will be able to uncover *why* and *how* instructor immediacy works, which instructional communication researchers have not yet done.

In Chapter 12, Melanie Booth-Butterfield and Melissa Wanzer review the role that humor plays in the instructional setting. They begin their chapter by providing an overview and theoretical background of the study

of humor, addressing the three seminal theories (i.e., arousal relief or relief theory, incongruity theory, and disparagement or superiority theory) that have guided humor research and introducing a new theory (i.e., instructional humor processing theory) to explain further the purported link between instructor use of humorous messages and student learning. They then explore the benefits instructors and students associate with humor use in the classroom before reviewing the various typologies of humor used by instructors. From this review, they shift their focus to highlighting the Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991)—one measurement tool used extensively to assess both instructor and student perceptions of humor in the classroom—by assessing the reliability and validity of the scale, summarizing the characteristics of individuals who possess a humor orientation, and identifying the ways in which humor orientation operates in the classroom. They conclude their chapter by offering directions for future research and encouraging instructional communication researchers to continue the study of humor across instructional contexts.

In Chapter 13, Scott Titsworth and Joseph Mazer trace the evolution of the instructor clarity construct from its roots in educational psychology to its current state in communication studies. Their chapter commences with a provision of the theoretical foundations of clarity research, which is followed by a cumulative review of the research efforts undertaken by educational psychologists (i.e., the Ohio State studies) and researchers in communication studies (i.e., the perception studies) to conceptualize and operationalize the instructor clarity construct. They then examine the classroom effects of instructor clarity by identifying the links between instructor clarity and student affective and cognitive learning; highlighting the linguistic dimensions of instructor clarity; recognizing the interaction effects between instructor clarity, instructor immediacy, and student test anxiety; reporting the results gleaned from instituting training on instructor clarity; and exploring the role culture plays in student perceptions of instructor clarity. They offer recommendations for the future study of instructor clarity by offering three observations: (1) instructor clarity is multidimensional, (2) future studies should emphasize the process of instructor clarity (rather than its product), and (3) instructor clarity research is foreshadowed by a positive bias. They conclude their chapter by reminding instructional communication researchers who are interested in studying instructor clarity to do so in a manner that avoids conflating the study of clarity with the study of effective instructional communicative behaviors.

In Chapter 14, Matthew Martin and Scott Myers explore the relational side of instructional communication by focusing on the relational approach to teaching via the influence of instructor presentational communication traits in the college classroom. They begin their chapter by providing an overview of the trait approach to the study of instructor communication. They then narrow their focus to the explication of three

instructor presentational traits, which are instructor self-disclosure, instructor communicator style, and instructor socio-communicative style. For each trait, they review its operationalization (i.e., definition, components) and summarize the research conducted on its outcomes (e.g., links with other instructor communication traits, behaviors, or attributes) and effects (e.g., student perceptions of instructors, student learning). Positing that the continued study of instructor communication traits is warranted, Martin and Myers recommend that instructional communication researchers consider analyzing the situations in which student behavior occurs, focusing on students' reports of their communication traits, and relying less on student self-reports as the primary mode of data gathering. They conclude their chapter by suggesting that instructional communication researchers who embrace the trait approach to instructional communication should be able to enhance the study of the relational approach to teaching.

Conclusion

Based on this collective body of research, it appears that the field of instructional communication has continued (and will continue) to enjoy a healthy existence. As instructional communication research moves into the next decade, it stands to reason that not only will researchers continue to study the communicative factors in the teaching-learning process that occur across grade levels, instructional settings, and subject matter; they will also identify, investigate, and expatiate the factors that make the study of instructional communication unique.

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