

# An OPPT-In Approach to Relational and Emotional Organizational Communication Pedagogy

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**Sarah J. Tracy<sup>1</sup>, Tara M. Franks<sup>1</sup>,  
Margaret M. Brooks<sup>1</sup>, and Trisha K. Hoffman<sup>1</sup>**

Growing evidence suggests that tomorrow's workers face challenges interacting with one another competently and compassionately (Turkle, 2011). Meanwhile, young adults increasingly struggle to maintain meaningful relationships and hold emotionally competent conversations (Barnwell, 2014). Despite the importance of relational communication competence in the workplace, life activities provide decreasing opportunities for its practice. This is why organizational communication courses are essential for creating future employees who understand and can practice or negotiate compassion, emotional labor, conflict negotiation, workplace bullying, and emotional intelligence. In this essay, we propose an ontological-phenomenological-phronetic-transformative (OPPT) approach—something we call OPPT-in—for providing students with access to engage in relational organizational communication in live, real-time experience. This approach differs from the traditional approach evidenced in most textbooks and syllabi.

## **The Traditional Approach to Teaching Relational–Emotional Communication**

To create a picture of current practice, we conducted a Google search for organizational communication course syllabi from the past 5 years. From this list, we selected 17 syllabi as a maximum variation sample (Tracy, 2013) and

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<sup>1</sup>Arizona State University, Tempe, USA

### **Corresponding Author:**

Sarah J. Tracy, The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 871205, Tempe, AZ 85287-1205, USA.

Email: Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu

analyzed their objectives, assignment types, and topic areas. We next reviewed the most popularly listed organizational communication textbooks as listed by Amazon.com. Across these data, the most commonly shared relational and emotional topics included leadership, decision making, forming interpersonal relationships, organizational ethics, culture and diversity, emotions at work, conflict management, and negotiation skills.

Our analysis reveals that these topics are taught primarily through an epistemological, third-person, mastery framework. Students learn *about* the topics via explanatory terms. Course objectives ask students to *critically analyze and assess* major theories, *understand* organizations from various perspectives/contexts, *identify and define* key concepts, and *develop an appreciation for and mastery of* organizational practices. Epistemological knowledge is also represented in course activities, assignments, and evaluation measures that require students to write papers in which they *research* or *summarize* literature and test students on their ability to *identify, define, or synthesize* concepts.

Some books and courses use case studies (e.g., Conrad & Poole, 2012; Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2009; May, 2013; Miller, 2013; Mumby, 2013; Shockley-Zalabak, 2012; Zaremba, 2009). Here, students act as hypothetical employees or managers applying themes or concepts to make sense of workplace scenarios. The case study approach, popularized by the Harvard Business School, has the advantage of moving from memorization of concepts to application of ideas in context (Flyvbjerg, 2012). That said, it still relegates students to being spectators; the theory is “out there” to be “understood” and then applied to a situation “out there” that students may (or may not) personally encounter.

Epistemological learning of theories and application of concepts in case studies is valuable. However, a crucial component for learning emotional and relational aspects of organizational communication, largely missing in our classrooms and teaching resources, is asking students to *practice, exercise, and discover* course material for themselves in their immediate experience. We can encourage a “being” methodology by intertwining an ontological-phenomenological (OP) model with phronesis (P) and transformative (T) pedagogy—forming what we call an OPPT-in.

## Building an OPPT-In Approach

An ontological-phenomenological model (Erhard, Jensen, Zaffron, & Granger, 2013) makes a distinction between “in the stands” and “on the court” learning. The goal in this model is not for students to leave the course knowing *about* a topic or *acting* a certain way, but to *become*. In the case of relationally and emotionally competent organizational communication, this

model would ask students to enact conversations, exercise ways of being (e.g., as compassionate, empathetic, or forgiving), and engage in group reflections. Past research and theory would serve as resources to illuminate current situations, rather than as screens through which to view the world. Indeed, from a phenomenological point of view, pre-existing theories, opinions, and facts must be bracketed and temporarily set aside in order for researchers to engage meaningfully with phenomena and people in a given context (Vagle, 2014).

Phronetic social science pairs well with an ontological-phenomenological model. Phronesis, an Aristotelian concept, approaches the study of organizations with an emphasis on values, power, and context; it “goes beyond analytical, scientific knowledge (episteme) and technical knowledge or know-how (techne). It involves judgments and decisions” (Flyvbjerg, 2012, p. 26). A virtuoso social actor deliberates on what is prudent and good, making decisions in each particular circumstance, and understanding that competent practice cannot be reduced to theoretical knowledge.

Creating opportunities for self-reflexivity via transformative learning is an important step toward phronesis. Good pedagogy encourages students to question their “ways of being and acting in the world,” ways of “making sense of lived experience,” and examine “the issues involved in acting responsibly and ethically” (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 93). Transformative learning asks students to interrogate their beliefs, values, and experiences and explore options while they acquire knowledge and apply skills toward a new course of action (Mezirow, 2000). In this approach, “the instructor’s job is less to provide answers than to act as partner, catalyst, resource, or poser of questions that sharpen learners’ thinking” (Taylor, 2000, p. 166). Transformative learning is action-oriented and encourages students to take responsibility for their choices (Mezirow, 2000).

## **How to Implement an OPPT-In Approach in the Classroom**

Combining these building blocks creates an OPPT-in approach that shifts the traditional student–teacher–classroom dynamic. Epistemological course objectives use words such as understand, master, analyze, apply, identify, and describe. Alternatively, OPPT-in objectives encourage students to

- Question assumptions
- Uncover blind spots about breakdowns
- Be the course concepts (e.g., empathetic, compassionate, emotionally intelligent) and discover how they show up in everyday life

- Balance work and life
- Practice difficult conversations
- Listen and converse empathetically with others
- Celebrate breakthroughs.

Course activities align with these objectives. For example, first author Tracy leads an activity of “doing” work–life balance by asking students to record their behavior (e.g., Am I returning emails during dinner? Am I complaining about work or my kids? When do I feel most alive?), write the number of hours they currently engage in various activities (e.g., paid work, domestic labor, leisure, etc.), map out preferences for future work–life balance, and talk about these issues with significant others. Through this activity, and referencing the objectives listed above, students *discover* how course concepts are present in creating work–life dilemmas, *uncover blind spots*, and *practice difficult conversations* to better *balance* work and life. After the activity, students engage with course readings about work–life in complex and personally relevant ways.

Indeed, an OPPT-in approach encourages students to first practice an activity where they must *be*, *become*, and *do* the topic, and only then read about and/or apply it to a hypothetical case. Our colleague Jess Alberts, for example, asks students to seek out and actively engage in a wide variety of conflict and negotiation scenarios, see what happens, and then come into class ready to discuss the situation. Only after they *listen and converse with others*, *question assumptions*, and *discover course concepts in their own lives*, do students read about conflict theories that elucidate their lived experiences. Along the way, they *uncover blind spots* and *celebrate breakthroughs*.

Evaluation and teaching procedures in an OPPT-in model also transform, becoming a shared experience among classroom members through self-assessments, professional mentoring access, accountability peer buddies, goal setting (for self and class), and strategically ambiguous assignments. If we were teaching the concept of forgiveness at work, for example, the activity might ask students to *practice empathetic listening* with a colleague with whom they have experienced a relational breakdown. Afterward, students can debrief about blind spots, breakthroughs, and breakdowns, identify strategies for future successful conversations, and actively practice those conversations.

Finally, this approach re-envision the classroom and instructor. OPPT-in instructors must have the courage and energy to practice empathy and be a resource for students as they experience successes and failures. In such an approach, instructors are co-participants and enablers, creating actionable pathways for students to practice and develop emotional/relational competence and respond to organizational experiences and dilemmas.

## Why Organizational Communication Scholars Should OPPT-In

The OPPT-in approach can advance the field of organizational communication and make our research more relevant in several different ways. First, it can equip organizational communication students to *be* compassionate, empathetic, emotionally intelligent, civil, and vibrantly able to negotiate work and life responsibilities. The approach has the potential to create immediate change and impact in students' lives. Students don't have to wait and see how the material may be relevant years down the line. Second, OPPT-in is inherently communicative. Through course activities and assignments, students are sources of learning and literally talk organizational concepts into being. Furthermore, the approach calls for critical dialogue about experiences, perceptions, constraints, and actions. Embodying the constitutive, relational, and emotional aspects of organizing provides a potent, visceral, personal, learning experience. This approach is particularly useful for relational and emotional domains of organizing in which cognitive and epistemological understandings are not enough for creating communicators who can practice compassion, leadership, empathy, and forgiveness in messy everyday practice. Third and relatedly, OPPT-in can empower students and simultaneously encourage reflexivity by creating a course context wherein students actively discover emotional and relational aspects of organizational communication concepts for themselves. The discipline of organizational communication has a long history of excellence in applied and collaborative research, and in this model, students are co-creators and active participants in meaning-making.

Of course, accomplishing this approach is not without risk or additional work. Future research could more fully compare OPPT-in with other pedagogical schools of thought as well as provide more specific examples and instructions for syllabi, course activities, and evaluation measures. To fully embody the role of a "partner, catalyst, or resource" (Taylor, 2000, p. 166), educators must look beyond epistemological mastery, memorization, and content appreciation. As teachers, administrators, scholars and practitioners, we have a duty to support, challenge, and empower our students, not only for their own capabilities as future organizational members but also for their potential to become relationally and emotionally competent citizens.

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### **Author Biographies**

**Sarah J. Tracy** (PhD, University of Colorado) is a professor and co-director of The Transformation Project in The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on organizational communication, qualitative methodology, transformation, and emotion at work.

**Tara Franks** (MA, San Diego State University) is a doctoral candidate in The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Her research interests include the study of humor, gender, and organizational communication as well as critical communication pedagogy.

**Margaret M. Brooks** (MA, Saint Louis University) is a doctoral student in The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on organizations and the communication of leadership, collaboration, and conflict among problem-solving teams.

**Trisha K. Hoffman** (MA, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville) is a doctoral candidate in The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Her research interests include clinical communication, personal and relational well-being, and critical pedagogy.