

Transformative Practice and Research in Organizational Communication

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Chapter 12

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

PRACTICAL APPLICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: A REVIEW OF THE PAST

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

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

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

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

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- Authors who publish in *Management Communication Quarterly*—arguably the premier journal outlet for organizational communication scholarship—are typically required to include a “practical application” section in their essays.
- The *Journal of Applied Communication Research* is regularly edited by scholars affiliated with organizational communication (e.g., Joann Keyton, Michelle Jackson, David Seibold, Katherine Miller, Deborah Dougherty).
- Organizational communication scholar Joann Keyton was the founding editor of *Communication Currents* (www.CommunicationCurrents.com). With the tagline of “knowledge for communicating well,” this freely available NCA web-based newsletter regularly includes organizational communication scholarship translated into brief clearly-written articles.
- The Aspen Conference for Engaged Scholarship (<http://www.aspenengaged.org/>) showcases organizational communication scholars as featured speakers. As noted on their website, the conference focuses on: “...the practice of engaged scholarship in organizational communication. We invite academics and practitioners, graduate students and faculty, and anyone who is passionate about developing new models of engaged scholarship aimed at addressing significant cultural, political, and social issues that confront contemporary society. // Our conference schedule ... allows participants to think deeply about engaged scholarship and how these ideas and practices play out in their professional lives.”
- Practical application has been one of five primary domains in the vicennial conference “Organizational Communication Traditions, Transitions, and Transformations,” (Downs, 1999) each of the three times that it has convened and from which this very edited book is being developed.

As can be seen in this overview, organizational communication scholarship has actively focused on applied research that may shed light on or solve problems. It is safe to say that the entire subfield has been touched by the focus on practical application. A handful of scholars who have been especially influential in these effort include: Kevin Barge, Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, Jennifer Simpson, Sue Dewine, David Seibold, Joann Keyton, and Eric Eisenberg (e.g., Barge & Little, 2002; Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Dewine, 2005; Eisenberg, 2005; Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2004, 2007; Seibold, 2005; Simpson, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005).

In addition to these efforts, organizational communication scholars frequently engage in practical application via case study creation and analysis (Fyke, 2016). For example, Zorn (1997) examined Weaver St. Market as a case on workplace democracy—and how to improve the low morale and ironic lack of cooperativeness among a market co-op. Most cases, like this one, exemplify problematic or ethically questionable organizational situations and apply various organizational concepts (identification, crisis communication, hegemony) to shed light on, solve, or improve the situation (e.g., Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2004, 2007; May, 2012; Sypher, 1997). The same is true for the types of movies most commonly screened in organizational communication courses. Popular choices include *Office Space* (Rappaport, Rotenberg, & Judge, 1999), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (Tokofsky, Zupnik, & Foley, 1992), *The Devil Wears Prada* (Finerman & Frankel, 2006), and *The Big Short* (Gardner, Kleiner, Milchan, Pitt, & McKay, 2015). These movies focus on the dehumanizing or unethical aspects of organizing—issues like unscrupulous financial conduct, workplace bullying, and toxic organizational cultures.

Interestingly, though, for all its concern for creating productive organizations where employees may flourish, very little pedagogy and scholarship has focused on revealing, examining, or engaging in craft practices associated with especially positive or masterful ways of organizing (with the exception of some

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scholarly case studies focusing on social justice, such as Zoller and Meloncon (2013) who examined community activism at work). This is important because by only examining negative deviance, people learn very little about how to create organizational communication and relationship so that they are particularly positive or flourishing (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Simply *describing* or *analyzing*, or *theorizing* organizational issues—whether positive or negative in nature—may not be enough if we as a discipline are interested in creating organizations that actually work.

THE LIMITATIONS OF PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Most current organizational communication scholarship has focused on epistemological objectives like describing, analyzing, and understanding. In an investigation of organizational communication textbooks and syllabi, Tracy, Franks, Brooks, and Hoffman (2015) found that course objectives in organizational communication courses typically ask students to “analyze,” “critique,” “understand,” “assess,” “describe” and in some cases, “apply.” Most of our textbooks enable students to consider whether organizations are machines, cultures, systems, networks, clans. Our theories prompt discussions on whether organizing should be discussed as a verb rather than a noun, and whether organizations are “things” at all, but are rather—as communicative constitution of organization would suggest—scaffolds of imbrications (Brumans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014). In short, the material in our classrooms usually manifests in the form of students first learning about organizational histories, theories, or knowledge, and occasionally laying this information on top of case studies, movies, popular books, or their own experience. Indeed, this is what practical application is about.

There is nothing wrong with the epistemological approach to learning and application if the goal is learning *about* organizational theories and topics. However, this approach is not enough if a goal of organizational communication practical application is to inspire students to practice or “be” in organizations in an expert way. As noted by Tracy et al. (2015):

The case study approach...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 (p. 323).

If one of the goals of organizational communication practical application is to create human flourishing, then one might ask whether application is enough—and why teachers rarely expect that students or key readers of our scholarship might “practice,” “communicate,” “be” or use language as a result of our scholarship so as to open up opportunities for organizational communication expertise as craft practice. While educators occasionally ask students to practice concepts in their own individual work situations (Blood, 2006), these activities are often separated into internship or service learning programs (Van de Ven & Zlotkowski, 2005) where students receive little feedback, spend little to no time in critical self-reflection, and receive no generative support on the results of their way of performing of organizational communication as a craft.

Value also lies in asking students to immerse themselves or watch mastery in organizational communication, to work alongside experienced leaders and organizational communicators, or to practice themselves in organizations so they might develop a level of competence or expertise. Some scholars

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may attest that these activities are not the province of organizational communication—that this is the work of what some may consider the red-haired stepchild of organizational communication scholarship: namely, business or professional communication (Waldeck, Kearney, Plax, 2012). However, one can certainly make the argument, especially when ascribing to a communicatively constituted view of organizations (McPhee & Zaug, 2000), that creating sustainable and functioning organizations requires some types of communication craft practice. Indeed, if we take seriously the notion that organizations are constituted by communication, it seems natural that due attention should be devoted to constituting the communicative raw materials that make up flourishing and functioning organizations. Hands-on experience is a valuable way in which people acquire and hone skills, yet there are currently gaps in our discipline between organizational communication scholarship, and life as lived.

Organizational communication as a discipline has flourished with epistemological discussions which, in turn, have produced careers, research centers, and doctoral programs where theorizing thrives (Ashcraft, 2002). The act of applying rules and theories to a practical case, according to “learning theory” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), is certainly enough to move people from beginner to competent in skill acquisition. Concurrently, organizational communication has focused on practical application—expressed in many forms such as applying theory to case studies, showcasing practical implications in scholarly essays, hosting conferences on engaged scholarship, and translating academic research into briefs for public consumption. But is this enough? As elucidated in the next section, organizational communication as a discipline is ready to go beyond practical application as it has been typically performed and move toward research and teaching that provide access to expert craft practice.

EXPERT CRAFT PRACTICE IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION VIA OPPT-IN

Practical application as it has traditionally been performed in organizational communication, tends to foreground theory, epistemology, and information. In other words, researchers tend to start with these sacred academic materials in hand, and only then turn to making sense of, analyzing, ordering, or fixing the messy work of organizations. Practical application in such a model is undoubtedly very useful for testing the value of organizational theories and may indeed build bridges to audiences outside of academia. Furthermore, practical application activities—especially those as exemplified in typical case study books—are excellent for showing how and why various organizational problems unfolded the way they did. Nonetheless, “application always privileges a priori conceptual knowledge divorced from context and ignores the fact that expertise, practical wisdom, and being in the world is not created by applying something” (Tracy, 2017).

In the context of the classroom, practical application is also usually considered something that students do “later” and after they leave the academy (and presumably after organizational communication academicians have very little direct interaction with them). What might it look like if organizational communication scholarship provided access to new ways of acting and being in life as lived—not only in the future should it be applied in the future, but immediately? Said another way, organizational communication practical application in its current form largely leaves students one step removed from the practice—saying, in effect, “Here is the knowledge, and here are some hypothetical situations, and hopefully, someday, you can apply all this good stuff if you can remember it.” What if organizational communication scholarship and pedagogy, instead, provided access to knowledge and application that

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might expand students' opportunity set for ways of being and acting, and did so in a way that left them with *no* steps removed from impacting themselves and the organizations, groups, and communities in which they already belong? And what activities might support a move from application toward access to expertise in practice?

First, it would be useful to better exploit the viewpoints that already guide the field. Much organizational communication research rests on paradigmatic assumptions that reality is socially constructed, that things in the world (policies, structures, typical patterns of behavior) are formed discursively (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004), that language is constitutive (McPhee & Zaug, 2000), and that new language and conversational domains create the requisite variety required to adequately see and act in the world anew. However, right now, these theories are mostly viewed as things to know, rather than as access to ways of being. Scholars and educators could valuably encourage the living and practicing (and not just the knowing about) some of these fundamental theories that already undergird organizational communication scholarship.

Weick (1995) argues that humans gain access to different selves (what one might call ontologies or ways of being) through requisite variety; i.e., having a tool as complex as the problem attempting to be solved. As peoples' linguistic (and subsequently our meaning-assigning) toolbox grows, the better able they are to see something as uniquely different than something else. Indeed, new language provides access to new ways of seeing the same exact circumstances—and in doing so, provides new opportunities for action. For example, if someone says, "I must *deal* with XYZ," XYZ occurs to them as out of control that they must put up with. However, if that person says, "I *choose* XYZ," one's responsibility in the situation comes to the foreground and new opportunities for action arise. So, how might the discipline turn students onto this power of language for opening up expert communication craft practice—and do so in a way that they are left not only able to define and apply theories of social and discursive construction, but see the power of them in their own lives and organizations?

ELUCIDATING AN ONTOLOGICAL, PHENOMENOLOGICAL, TRANSFORMATIVE, PHRONETIC (OPPT-IN) APPROACH

Tracy et al. (2015) introduce a "being" approach—something called "OPPT-in"—an acronym for intertwining research from an ontological-phenomenological (OP) model (Erhard, Jensen, Zaffron, & Granger, 2014; Souba, 2014), with phronesis (P) (Flybvjerg, 2001), and transformative (T) pedagogy (Mezirow, 2000a). What follows is a review of and expansion on this approach.

Ontology, the O in the OPPT-in framework, is not about the science of reality or existence, but rather focuses on the notion of thrownness, and being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996). The approach moves theories of social and discursive construction from epistemological frameworks to models that allow for an interrogation and reassessment of life as lived. It asks people to consider how they wound up being a particular way of acting or behaving in the world; and asks them to identify the stories they are living and how those stories shape and constrain other possible ways of being and knowing available. An ontological approach in the field of communication is particularly useful given that it is through communication (and particularly narrative) that individuals understand themselves and their experiences. Narrative not only explains an experience; it produces meaning, reality, and action (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative provides access to our and others' lives as-lived.

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The first P in OPPT-in refers to phenomenology, and phenomenology's use as a method to access the essence of a certain practice for the person or people experiencing it. In short, "phenomenology seeks to expose the implicit structure and meaning of such experience. It is the search for the 'essence of things' that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation" (Lin, 2013, p. 470). A phenomenological approach asks questions such as, "What is the essence of organizational flourishing," or "What is the essence of being a leader"—rather than being interested in this or that trait or personality make-up, or variable of these things. Together, an ontological-phenomenological approach encourages researchers and teachers to access transformed and preferred ways of being by examining the essence and being of life as lived and seeing how being shows up through the phenomena of language.

The second P in OPPT-in is Aristotle's notion of phronesis. Oftentimes referred to as practical wisdom, phronesis comes from experience. As Aristotle said, "Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it... We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate ones, brave by doing brave ones." (Aristotle, 1976, p. 91). Relatedly, one becomes communicative by communicating; "engaging a context, complete with the shock and messiness that accompanies the happenstance of concrete social situations, is vital for clarifying moral issues and problems" (Tracy, 2007, p. 107). Messiness and improvisation are not new ideas to organizational communication. More than 25 years ago, Eisenberg (1990) suggested that jamming was the ultimate metaphor for organizational transcendence—and that jamming requires surrender to the context and fluid behavioral coordination that occurs only when one moves beyond typical rules and structures.

Certainly, "bodily involvement, speed, and an intimate knowledge of concrete cases in the form of good examples is a prerequisite for true expertise" (Flybvjerg, 2001, p. 15). So how might phronesis make its way into a classroom?

Students need to develop their phronetic capabilities to improvise, because wise action is never about the straightforward application of a single theory to sort out what to do next; wise action is about acting in the moment, improvising with the available theoretical and practical materials at hand, and engaging in bricolage to respond to the unique circumstances constituting a situation. (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008, p. 256 referencing Barge & Little, 2002)

As a craft practice, phronesis allows the individual to go beyond merely the application of what *can* be done in a situation (a conclusion the individual could draw from knowledge), to the act of doing what *should* be done. This requires discernable wisdom to not merely know about, but to act virtuously and wisely in a particular situation. Phronesis in this sense is not a gift or an intuition, but a carefully honed practice of embodied natural expression based on the situation. Practical wisdom does not come from articulating theories or analyzing cases but from repeatedly being and acting (e.g., by being compassionate, by being a listener, by exercising leadership; by creating sustainable organizations where employees flourish). Organizational communication scholars may engage in a variety of activities that may motivate key audiences to improvise, jam, and engage in bricolage.

Finally, literatures on transformative learning make up the final T component of OPPT-in. Transformative and experiential learning approaches are gaining traction in a variety of disciplines including sustainability (Moore, 2005), communication (Mortenson, 2007), management (Cunliffe, 2004), and medicine (Souba, 2011). Key tenets that run through discussions of transformative learning include 1) critical self-reflexivity, or the practice of becoming aware of one's own assumptions and how they are guiding action; 2) the process of *unlearning* practices and beliefs that are constraining preferred ways

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of being; and 3) engaging in practices of listening, empathy, and perspective-taking so that one might see the world from a variety of points of view (Mezirow, 2000b).

Something to note about OPPT-in's use of transformative learning is that transformation as practice is less about changing the circumstances of a particular situation; rather transformational learning is accomplished when the same circumstances or facts of the matter occur differently for those involved and, through this transformed occurring, individuals access preferred ways of being and acting that were previously unavailable --something that may indeed then result in transforming future facts of the matter. Transformational learning is best understood as the formation of human being and action rather than merely the development of a mind or a person (the conventional way education is approached). A phenomenological approach to teaching would suggest that, "We begin (and tend to remain) uninformed of our own potentiality for being. The notion of formation, as such, focuses on the possibility that a human individual may overcome [his or her] lack for formation" (Brook, 2009, p. 56). Incorporating this, OPPT-in intentionally focuses on activities in which students "try on" new uses of language and being, and as a result have the opportunity to discover the many possibilities available in human form; by becoming more malleable or undone in their current form, opportunities and potentialities arise that have yet to be realized.

THE ROLE OF SENSEBREAKING, SENSEGIVING, AND SENSEMAKING IN OPPT-IN

Weick's sensebreaking, sensegiving, sensemaking model is also quite helpful for elucidating an OPPT-in approach. Sensemaking is the act of making sense of a particular situation, or in some cases gaining access to that which was previously not sensible. Sensemaking is a first-person activity whereby:

Once people begin to act (enactment), they generate tangible outcomes (cues) in some context (social), and this helps them discover (retrospect) what is occurring (ongoing), what needs to be explained (plausibility), and what should be done next (identity enhancement) (Weick, 1995, p. 55).

This entire process revolves around what meanings are (and subsequently what meanings are not) available to the individual when a situation calls for sensemaking. Availability in this case refers to the ontological outcomes that a person can consider in a particular situation consistent with their world view. Sensemaking then helps to explain a number of social phenomena including how and why people behave the way they do in times of crisis, in moments when they experience cognitive dissonance, and when identities are threatened. Weick (1995) argues that people tend to rely on worn scripts, meaning they "create and find what they expect to find" (p. 35). Routine sensemaking provides little access for producing fresh ontologies of thought.

One might ask "Where is new sense created?" For Weick and others, these can be historically found in times of crisis or through crucible moments, which tend to forcibly shake people into seeing a certain situation anew (Bennis, & Thomas, 2002; Weick, 1993). Certainly, subjecting students or readers to scholar-contrived crucible moments may be neither feasible nor ethical. So what is an alternative for creating new sense?

Two key aspects of sensemaking are sensebreaking and sensegiving. Sensebreaking helps to explain the process by which a person's way of being and thinking is broken either by situation or by others. In

moments in which sensebreaking occurs—something that is achieved in OPPT-in through critical self-reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2004) and ontological course activities—individuals are able to detect the limits of their current sensemaking frames, invent new actions, detect new sensibilities, and discover new ways of interacting in the world. Sensebreaking is a disorienting space which demands resolution. *Sensegiving* is the process by which such dissonance can be resolved, and as such should be something that “always embodies the possibilities of escape from what might otherwise appear to us to be incomprehensible, or from what might otherwise appear to us to be a chaotic, indifferent, or incorrigible world—one over which we have no ultimate control” (Weick, 1995, p. 10). Sensegiving provides people with access to actions involving new tangible outcomes, discovery of new ontologies, and a consideration for what is plausible and useful action in certain contexts. In an OPPT-in course, the course readings, activities, and unique use of language together constitute sensegiving materials.

Finally, interaction is a critical aspect to both sensemaking and OPPT-in. Sensemaking is always created in a community (or with an imagined audience) of others. Although Weick’s early work on sensemaking was individual and cognitive, his later work accentuates that sensemaking is a discursive exercise constituted in interaction. As elaborated by Tracy, Myers, and Scott (2006, p. 287):

Sensemaking emerges intersubjectively in the collective and chaotic situations that cause members to lose and regain sense at the group or organizational level (Weick, 2001). Indeed, the actual, implied, or imagined presence of others is imperative for sensemaking to occur (Weick, 2001, p. 461).

Sensebreaking and the critical self-reflexivity associated with transformative learning can be an emotionally shocking experience (Cunliffe, 2004; Moore, 2005). Collective acknowledgement and social support creates a caring environment that encourages people to engage in self-reflexive vulnerability. Ontological learning activities that incorporate sensebreaking and sensegiving as methodological approaches aim to create space in the classroom for students to dwell in new (and potentially uncertain) cognitive situations. Students are not expected to “accept” or “learn” course concepts, but instead are introduced to new ways of distinguishing life as lived, and activities that ask them to simply try practicing certain activities or language framings. Along the way, they are encouraged to revel in the puzzlement of their experiences, share their cognitive dissonance, and discuss how the practice of certain ways of being impacts their relationships with others and themselves. In short, the sensebreaking and sensemaking occur as students make discoveries in their own life as lived (this is in contrast, for instance, to viewing students as subjects who are “filled” with knowledge or “transformed” by external agents). The course instructors provide support, but they are not the agents of creating new sense. To illustrate how this looks in-use, the final part of this essay provides an in-depth description of one way an OPPT-in approach may be practiced in an organizational communication related course.

BEING UNREASONABLE: AN OPPT-IN CLASS ACTIVITY

In a course on leadership taught by the authors of this chapter, students are asked to discover for themselves the importance of making powerful requests to others as a necessary aspect of effective leadership. The act of making requests is likely familiar to most students—they have been making requests of one type or another their entire lives, and thus have a long relationship with this communicative act first-hand. Furthermore, they likely have learned about requests in their communication theory courses, as request-

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making would traditionally be taught epistemologically when learning speech acts theory (Morris, 1938; Searle, 1969). However, rather than merely re-present request-making as a learned concept, OPPT-in provides an opening for students to interrogate their current relationship with requests and access new opportunity sets for engaging in request-receiving and making. How is this accomplished?

Before getting into the particular activity, it is important to provide some context. In this particular class, students create a semester leadership project in collaboration with people in one or more of their social groups or organizations. This project then becomes the playground to practice course concepts related to leadership (such as making requests). With that background provided, the activity proceeds as follows.

The students are first presented with a conceptual grasp of the nature and function of requests and promises (i.e., how these fit into a larger context of communicative leadership behaviors known as speech acts). Requests are defined as specific questions to another (e.g., “Will you...”) to which another is free to respond with a yes, no, counter-offer, or a statement saying by when they will commit to their response (e.g., “let me check my calendar, and I’ll get back to you by Monday of next week”). A promise is explained to be a specific commitment that includes a “what”, “to whom” and “by when”. Students are reminded that a successful leadership project will require each of them to make requests and promises. Furthermore, they read and reflect on some of the common cognitive impediments to making requests (e.g., not wanting to feel like they are imposing, not being liked, coming off as demanding) (Budd & Rothstein, 2000). Students then reflect on past factors that have impeded their making requests and promises.

Next, the course activities serve to enact sensebreaking and sensegiving through a series of carefully coordinated applications, which are meant to familiarize students with their typical way of acting with requests and promises. The activity creates space for cognitive dissonance, for new meaning to be discovered by the student, and for new being / practice to be accessed in their lives as lived. Students are asked to spend time brainstorming various requests they would like to make—no matter how outlandish or risky—that if granted would help fulfill/complete their leadership project. These have included requests to people in positions of power in organizations and/or the community with whom the student has no current working relationship, making requests to companies to offer their services for free, and making requests to friends, family, or complete strangers.

After creating a list of potential requests, students are asked to identify all the reasons they have for *not* making those requests. For example, a student who was interested in acquiring children’s bicycles for free from Craigslist classified advertisements might list as a reason not to make the request that, “it is rude to ask a person to give away for free something they listed to sell”. Meanwhile, a student who is attempting to ask a corporate executive to attend a weekend workshop might suppose that she, “has no legitimacy contacting a person who is extremely busy and important,” and that “there’s no way a person in that position will do something for free” especially “for a college student.” Students share their reasons for not making requests with the class. The instructor simply and sincerely responds after hearing each reason with, “that’s a good reason.”

Thus far, students have engaged in sensemaking as part of their typical way of being, which is to act in a way that their reasons guide their actions—and their tendency to believe their reasons are “true” without critically interrogating them as symbolic constructions. The instructor then cognitively primes students to recognize that “All of us goes through life with ‘very good reasons’ for doing the things that we do, and that we all have ‘very good reasons’ for not making requests that seem to be outside of reason.” The activity thus far has created access for students to discover for themselves that the logic of reason guides their action in life.

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Students are also now cognitively primed for a sensebreaking opportunity, which comes in the form of another activity and video. Students are asked to make a list of reasons for why they have not taken a particular step or action (a promise) toward their end of semester project. For example, a student may have promised that he would work with his friend's sister to set up a social media page by a certain date, but has failed to keep that promise. Students are encouraged to come up with a large variety of reasons for not keeping the promise. The course instructor prompts them with questions like: "What is the reason you didn't keep your promise?" The instructor then follows up with prompts asking them to write down, "the reason you would give if you were talking to your parents," "the reason you would give if talking to a potential boss," the "reason you would give to a teacher," and even "a totally made up or fake reason," and so on. Finally, the students are asked for "the really real reason" for not keeping the promise.

Immediately afterward, students share with a classmate their broken promise, and their long list of just-crafted reasons for breaking it. Each student takes turns sharing their reasons, to which the other student is instructed to simply respond with "that's a good reason." During this sharing portion, students usually begin to erupt with laughter, as they begin to hear absurdity in their reasons. Students sometimes discover that their "really real" reason for breaking their promise (e.g., "I was afraid that my friend's sister may not like what I was wearing that day") is "silly", no matter how logical it seemed to them in private, especially when responded to with "that's a good reason". And, sometimes we hear students exclaim, "the 'totally made up reason' is actually better than the 'really real' reason!" In doing so, they discover how reasons are socially constructed stories over which they hold creative license and power.

We follow the activity with a video in which Bernie Roth (Rodney H. Adams Professor of Engineering at Stanford University and co-founder of the famed Stanford Design School) performs a similar activity with a group of professionals. In his discussion, he unequivocally states that "we often confuse trying with doing" and that reasons are "nothing more than bullshit" (Roth, 2011). The way the word bullshit is used here aligns with Fritz Perl's notion of one type of conversation being bullshit talk (Lung, 2011) – "out-and-out lies that are told to conceal the truth, protect someone, and/or gain something" (Souba, 2014, p. 94). These lies are not only used in conversations with others, but in conversations with ourselves, oftentimes as a protective mechanism. This is a rare moment in the classroom where any type of crude language is used—and it serves as a point of impact that triggers cognitive dissonance.

Following the video and the claim that their reasons are simply bullshit, students share whatever reactions they are experiencing (oftentimes in the form of protest, rejection, justifications, and headshaking that their reasons are "bullshit"). Over time, students also begin to distinguish that their relationship with requests and promises is also a matter of their relationship with reasons, and that when reasons are removed, recreated, and seen as symbolic constructions, any personal withholdings related to powerful request and promise making also decreases. In life as lived, this might look like asking a boss or parent or peer to assist with a project even in a situation where the student feels nervous or unsure of the others' answer. The aim is to encourage students to discover the possibility that it can be equally true that their reasons are both "bullshit" and "very good", increasing their requisite variety of how reasons could occur to them as functioning in the world. That is, it's not as if people should go through life never having reasons or that reasons are inherently bad. Rather, the goal of the activity is to encourage students to discover that it is equally true that 1) their reasons are bullshit and stop action, and 2) that their reasons are useful or valid. In other words, the approach is designed to loosen and break the students' default sense of reasons.

To provide access for interacting with and seeing the world in a transformed way, unlearning must occur and new sense gained. The instructor reiterates that bold request and promise making is required

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for effective/powerful leadership, and that making requests of others and following through on promises is integral to creating action in the world. Students are introduced to a new course concept: the notion and importance of being “unreasonable.” At first the notion seems startling; students, it seems, should *not* be encouraged to be unreasonable. Because being reasonable has, in typical parlance and usage, likely been the only way students have perceived their decision-making and is generally (socially) thought of as a positive attribute, the term “unreasonable” occurs as quite dissonant. The way the term is presented in the course, however, is as a way of being that is free from (not constrained/predicated by) reasons (Erhard et al., 2014). Doing so helps give new sense to a course concept that creates a new context for how making and responding to requests can occur for students.

The activity creates the possibility of being “unreasonable” free from its past meaning. At this point, students are encouraged to practice being unreasonable in their lives and toward their leadership project. By this, they are encouraged to act (in this case, make requests and follow through on promises) that they have “very good reasons” for not making or following through on. Through journaling and self-reflection, the students are able to explore what it means to them to be unreasonable (or to make requests and promises in the face of the reasons that usually would have stopped them). As one past student revealed, he became aware that he could make a request to a copy shop to make free copies—and that doing so could be an opportunity not only for his leadership project, but also for the copy shop owner when she negotiated free advertising at his event. A request that at first seemed to him to only be a burden for the copy shop proprietor turned into an opportunity for both parties. Further, he saw he could be in action toward creating his event even when he had “perfectly good reasons” not to proceed with it (e.g., “I am too nervous,” and “Why would the store grant me a favor?”). As a result of the activity, students create a new relationship with reasons, requests, promises, and the power of going beyond their thrown way of being.

When students return to class next, they share what they distinguished by acting in a way that occurred a week prior as foreign/uncertain/dissonant. There is no single goal to the activity. However, students commonly discover one or more of the following: 1) that they have control over narrating the reasons that guide their action; 2) that these narratives often constrain their ability to make requests or promises and therefore create desired action in the world; 3) that they can make requests or keep promises despite their good stories / and good reasons. In short, the students begin to discover the possibility for being “unreasonable” with others and with themselves. As a result, students have engaged in a transformative process that provides access to a readiness potential in their lives for engaging with and practicing certain ways of being that beforehand seemed all but impossible.

In contrast to the practical application discussion earlier in this chapter, which tends to ask students to absorb knowledge to be used and applied later, an OPPT-in activity like this aims to leave students with some level of craft practice and skill in the short-term. Said another way, instead of students holding onto knowledge for the sake of applying it to a hypothetical case, or in hopes that they’ll find the right situation down the road to employ it, students are actively influencing the world through their doing immediately. And, then, they have a supportive atmosphere in which to reflect on their successes and missteps.

As with any new craft, an OPPT-in approach does not suggest transformation happens all at once; nor does it assume that simply because students begin interacting in new ways, that everyone in their lives will simply accept and fall in love with their way of being (e.g., in the case of the request making activity, students may at first have trouble stating requests in a way that other people will welcome). Indeed, an

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OPPT-in approach anticipates both breakthroughs and breakdowns, and through class sharing, students are able to discuss their missteps, and whatever they were able to discover as a result.

For this to work, stigmas associated with aspects of failure are reframed as opportunities for discovery. The OPPT-in approach creates space for students to share “what is working” and “what is not”—and students are encouraged to be compassionate with oneself and each other along the way. An important reminder is, “Anything worth doing well is worth doing badly [in the beginning]” (Chesterton, 1910). The class provides a place of support for students to do that. Via OPPT-in students are not only discovering new phenomenological and ontological realities for themselves, they are also developing *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in the safety of a supportive classroom. And they are improvising with this practical wisdom beyond the classroom into the spaces where practical application typically happens in their very lives.

In summary, this particular example of how OPPT-in connects with the “being unreasonable” activity shows how sensebreaking and sensegiving may disrupt the conventional way of thinking about a particular organizational communication practice (in this case request-making) and move a student to unlearn a previously-held perception. Sensebreaking is achieved through disruption of the everydayness of “good reasons.” Specifically designed critical self-reflexivity activities allow students to discuss and discover things for themselves as part of their own experience. By having students engage with the activity, they are not merely learning by doing, they are discovering a new way to interact in life as-lived. Rather than expecting students to epistemologically learn theories and best practices, students discover their own theories in use and are able to practice new ways of being. Doing so leaves them operating in a new world, creating a future that would have seemed beyond reach in their thrown way of being.

One student, who received media attention for his project, developed a program to create support resources for high school athletes to extend their playing careers in college (which in turn created an opportunity for students to be able to attend college via sport) (Petruska, 2015). Another student organized a bicycle reclamation and recycling program for children who could not otherwise afford bicycles. Other students created new job opportunities and started businesses, and many have engaged in fundraising for families and communities in need. And in each of these, students discovered for themselves an opportunity that, without being unreasonable (e.g., creating action in the face of their very good reasons and typical way of being), the project would not have happened in the world. These outcomes and the OPPT-in approach are not only relevant to the organizational communication discipline as a whole, but are particularly applicable to those organizational communication scholars who are interested in practical application and social justice organizing (Donovan & Tracy, In Press).

MOVING TOWARD THE FUTURE

This essay began with a review of where the organizational communication discipline as a whole has traveled as it relates to practical application, and then we introduced and provided an example of OPPT-in as an alternative and extension. Drawing from literature in ontology, phenomenology, *phronesis*, transformative learning, sensemaking, and narrative knowing, OPPT-in asks us to move beyond practical application. Instead, it emphasizes craft practice, improvisation, and bricolage, and suggests value in investigating positive deviants of communication mastery, exercising self-reflexivity, exploring how language creates contexts for transformation, and encouraging craft practice in contexts where actors have a stake in their performance—their very lives as lived.

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In a sense, OPPT-in turns practical application on its head. Rather than starting and ending with knowledge, OPPT-in begins with a process of unlearning that then results in a discovery [distinction] of collectively-created knowledge. Before people can know newly, they must unself themselves from the “knowing” or “already knowing” and come to a situation with fresh eyes. By re-creating meaning and sense, the realm of possibility expands and alternatives for being and action emerge that were earlier hidden or constrained.

Organizational communication scholars have long endorsed the power of discourse and narrative in the discovery of knowledge. As Polkinghorne (1988) notes, “each of us has direct access to only one realm of meaning: our own. Because it is not available to direct public observation, the region of meaning must be approached through self-reflective recall or introspection in our mental realm” (p. 7). OPPT-in employs critical self-reflection to access transformation and expert practice in the world. Polkinghorne continues, because we are “normally busy attending to the world, and meanings express themselves merely in our actions and speech; recognition of their presence requires that we consciously change the focus of awareness to the realm of meaning itself” (p. 7). By alternating the focus between possibility-giving (sensegiving), its attendant cognitive dissonance (sensebreaking), and practice in the field—and doing so in an environment of self-reflection, feedback, and social support—OPPT-in goes beyond practically applying organizational communication, and instead aims to use our scholarship to create access for others to practice expert ways of being. In doing so, the approach serves to increase the requisite variety of students’ learning such that the classroom is a place to practice course concepts as lived, and also practice stretching the mind in and beyond the classroom. And still, students leave with knowledge about the course content as well.

Although this chapter focused largely on organizational communication pedagogy, OPPT-in has wide-ranging application beyond teaching. In fact, OPPT-in provides a framework for craft practice that extends to the actual goals of organizational communication in a way that produces craft practitioners who may act in accordance with the flourishing that many scholars are interested in promoting. As the organizational communication discipline travels over the next 20 years, one potentially rich opportunity is to move beyond a focus on the practical application of epistemological knowledge to an OPPT-in approach that emphasizes improvisation, craft practice, immersion into positive deviants, and activities that ask us to try on specific ways of being—whether that be as a leader, a compassionate communicator, or a jammer.

“The activity of meaning making is not static” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 7), nor is it linear. OPPT-in is a journey rather than a destination. The point is not to arrive at a particular knowledge-set, but rather to practice new skill sets and new language for framing. OPPT(ing)-in has the potential to extend the established work of practical impact developed in organizational communication over the last forty years and propel us to communicatively constitute the organizations and lives we need to flourish into the future.

AUTHOR NOTE

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Craft Practice: The doing of a way of being in life as lived. In line with Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), the practice could be at various levels, including beginner, competent or expert. Expert craft practice requires lots of experience, and results in a level of proficiency that is natural and intuitive.

Critical Self-Reflexivity: The practice of critical self-reflection (introspection) in terms of how one's assumptions, beliefs, values, and actions influence her or his own subjective realities.

OPPT-In: An approach proposed by the authors of this book chapter, that incorporates ontological, phenomenological, phronetic, and transformative theories, which encourages people to engage in unselving, craft practice, and renewed sensemaking, ultimately resulting in expertise in life as lived.

Phronesis: Generally refers to practical and virtuous wisdom needed to capably navigate a variety of situations in life, developed through experience (action), which also includes the wisdom to not only know what can be done but what should be done in a particular instance.

Practical Application: In organizational communication, a term that refers to a type of research whereby the researcher/practitioner attempts 1) to apply epistemological knowledge to a particular case in order to explain the phenomena at hand, or 2) use epistemological knowledge as an intervention in a real-life situation or context to improve the outcome of that situation.

Requisite Variety: The law of requisite variety states that to capably deal with the assortment of problems the world throws at you, one needs to have an inventory of possible responses at least as complex as the problem one is trying to solve.

Sensebreaking: The process in which a person's default sense of meaning for a particular experience is broken either due to new and competing information or a lack of consistent information. Cognitive dissonance often accompanies sensebreaking.

Sensegiving: The process by which an individual achieves new sense after a sensebreaking incident. Sensegiving provides new and fresh meaning to a particular experience.

Sensemaking: The mental/cognitive process whereby individuals make sense of (i.e., make meaning of) their experiences.

Thrownness: A Heideggerian term used to describe a person's default way of operating in the world (i.e., how one is "thrown" to be in the world).

Unlearning/Unselving: A process whereby an individual attempts to set aside (bracket) the knowledge (cognitive habits, default way of thinking) in order to be able to discover new information or re-discover what is already known with fresh eyes.