

“Translating Scholarship into Practice”: An Alternative Metaphor

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As the millenium draws near, our discipline finds itself in an enviable position of having “communication” recognized as central to society. We, as scholars, have an opportunity to capitalize on the growing global awareness of communication’s importance. In short, we can answer Wartella’s (1994) call to gain visibility as “public intellectuals.”

We can seize this opportunity to set the course for a greater appreciation of the significance communication has in our everyday world. In 1991, Kreps, Frey, and O’Hair argued that although applied communication research is an important form of scientific inquiry, it is often misunderstood. Their insightful commentary about how applied research has been misconstrued lays the bases for an alternative point of view. Perhaps a different way to frame applied research may be productive. Clearly, Ehrenhaus’ (1991) argument for reformulating the notion of “applied” is persuasive.

“Translating scholarship into practice” is a concept born out of a preconference focusing on fundamental approaches to solving practical concerns by using the “science of interpretation” to translate theoretical orientations and research findings into useable information in the everyday world. Translating scholarship into practice is an idea with a rich historical tradition in communication. From the earliest studies in speech, the discipline has been committed to taking basic research and turning the findings into practice. However, we have not accomplished enough to harvest a unique position.

Effectively translating scholarship can help people solve social problems. We may contribute to alleviating obstacles and dilemmas that people face. We may enhance the lives of others if communication scholars become translators of their own work or encourage others to function as transporters. Although we may initially concern ourselves with contributions that the communication discipline brings to the everyday world, this is a two-way street. Not only might others benefit, but the discipline also stands to gain heartily from this investment. Showing how communication contributes to improve our understanding of the mundane and traumatic gives the discipline credibility in a wider arena. We illustrate numerous ways that communication is essential to our world. In so

doing, we link the importance of knowing about communication to ways we have uncovered its meaning.

The idea of translation is more dynamic than simply applying our research to problems. Through translation, we are able to preserve the integrity of the research and theory because it bridges knowledge production with knowledge utilization. Translating means that we take the knowledge discovered through research or theory and interpret it for everyday use. Translators develop pathways for converting research knowledge into practice. Sometimes translators of scholarship may find it initially difficult to locate the transfigured meaning of the results. The challenge is to determine the most advantageous channel of transferability to provide the greatest possibility of success.

Similar to the way languages are translated, the ultimate goal is to capture the nuances of meaning. The best translations also convey the cultural understanding along with the definition of the words and phrases. In the same way, we need to translate the complete meaning of the research and theory to take advantage of the broadest application possible. Of course, just as we see difficulties with linguistic translations, so too do we find problems with scholarship translated to the everyday world. This special issue introduces the advantages and challenges of translating scholarship through the five articles selected for the issue. These papers set the stage for ways to think about scholarship translation and provide several avenues to follow. In addition to the insights these articles contribute, this brief essay outlines an agenda for the future of translating scholarship into practice.

Scholarship Translation

Three issues suggest a path to develop scholarship translation. First, as scholars, we need to consider solutions to everyday problems that plague our society. These may range from mundane considerations of relational life to traumatic concerns that effect a person's survival. For the most part, we have already taken this step in recognizing the significance of social issues. We are much more conscious of pragmatic topics and as Wood (1995) points out, we do concern ourselves with "practicing theory." Frey's (1998) special issue in *JACR* May 1998 illustrates this point. Yet, we need more emphasis on developing theories that lend themselves to answering pragmatic questions.

In this issue, Cragan and Shields identify six theories (information systems, uncertainty reduction, boundary management, rational argumentation, narrative paradigm, and symbolic convergence theory) that have been used in a number of ways to address "real-world social problems." Their compilation and evaluation of these theories depict how translators have used theory to learn ways to solve concerns about job related satisfaction, how message-flow effects interactions, information sharing, privacy needs, public policies, group interaction, and physician-patient relationships. Ford, Ray, and Ellis also illustrate the way that dialectical theory advances translation for adult survivors of sexual abuse.

Although we need translators who solve "real-world" problems using a theoretical base, we also need to consider the manner in which we go from this first step of translation to a second step. That is, we need to reflect on ways that scholarship translations may be brought to an audience. Thus, it is not only pertinent that we focus on relevant social problems and everyday issues in

communication. We must also find avenues to transmit the information that are most beneficial for the target population.

The audience plays a major role in determining the transmutability of scholarship. Meaningful translations of research findings and theoretical proposals that help solve social, relational, organizational, political, or family problems are contingent on the target audience. Knowing the audience is important because the success we have as translators depends on being familiar with their needs, attitudes, and values. As Ellis (1991) cogently points out, in order for researchers to provide useful interpretations of their findings, they "must find the way that the message interacts with the recipient and then nurture the recipient along until the message takes 'effect' " (p. 118). In general, we may consider several audiences. For example, we already have experience with converting scholarship in the classroom.

Students have been our most frequent and long term recipients. We often take the research published in our journals or the studies we have conducted and illustrate how students can use this information to enhance their own lives. Frymier and Shulman (1995) argue that the relevance of information presented in the classroom is an important factor in student motivation. Consequently, the curriculum communication scholars use to teach students is more productive if there is a consideration of applicability. This type of translation may be found in the examples a teacher uses to explain theory and research, the choice of topics, and the textbook. However, the most problematic for translation may be the textbooks. Although there have been several excellent examples in recent years (e.g., Wood, 1997, 1998), textbook publishers, especially for the basic courses, often restrict the incorporation of new advances in scholarship no matter how well translated. We need to cultivate those publishers who are willing to take a chance on helping scholars advance our discipline.

One of the most viable ways of becoming "public intellectuals" is through linkage to the community. It is our challenge to show the lay population the value of communication scholarship. As the articles in this issue exemplify, adult survivors of sexual abuse, children in danger of skin cancer from sun exposure, employees experiencing sexual harassment, and adolescents who may fall prey to drug usage, all can learn ways of coping with these difficult social problems through translation of communication scholarship. These authors do not provide a wholesale explanation of these significant social concerns. Instead, they offer measured recommendations for possible ways to provide help without attempting to identify "standards of communication" (Ellis, 1991, p. 118) that reprimand other alternatives.

The formidable task we face is learning new ways to make the transition from research findings to community access. This means that once we make the conversion, we then must find ways to communicate those findings. This is the third point of translation. Not only is the audience important to bear in mind, but how translation is accomplished is also a significant issue. Among the articles in this issue, we find several ways in which translation may occur. There are many possibilities, including *interventions, training, distribution, and instruction*. For example, the research by Trost, Langan, and Kellar-Guenther offers information that is pertinent to *intervention programs*. Their study on drug resistance among adolescents argues that given the type of relationship children have with those offering drugs, intervention programs are likely to be more effective if they focus

on ways that adolescents can resist drug offers from same-sex friends, uncles, relational partners, and family members.

The article on sexual abuse by Ford, Ray, and Ellis offers insights that are instrumental in training programs for health care providers who work with adult survivors. From a theoretical base, this research shows that it is necessary to have a “vocabulary” to effect change and promote disclosure for abuse victims. When the health care provider understands the way that adult abuse survivors frame the dialectical nature of their experience, they are better equipped to develop therapeutic *interventions* that are meaningful.

The article on using coaches as role models of sun protection for youth by Parrott and Duggan highlights the importance of *training* as a means of accomplishing scholarship translation. For example, they suggest that given coaches tended to use sun protection before coming to games, as role models, they were less effective. Through training, however, coaches may increase their awareness of their modeling and recognize the importance of performing the task of applying sunscreen in the presence of the youths.

The article on organizational sexual harassment by Keyton and Rhodes also illustrates the usefulness of training in the translation process. These authors argue for considering the environmental factors in an organization that lead to the propensity for sexual harassment. The level of organizational tolerance for harassment was the focus of *training*. Though changing the level of tolerance, the workers were pressured to alter their behavior. In this way, the research was translated into meaningful actions and practices that have an impact on the organization.

Although these articles do not deal directly with *distribution*, our discipline can gain an advantage from finding ways to distribute translated scholarship to a larger population. There are many possible routes. For example, seeking out news reporters and magazine writers working in collaboration with the scholars to complete the translation process is a viable way to accomplish translation. Bringing the information into the public arena through the media in ways that maintains the integrity of the findings and conveys the information in an accessible fashion is the key. We should write our own books for the popular literature instead of being frustrated by those who write but are not educated in the scholarship of communication. *Instruction* is also a means of conveying translated scholarship, not only in the classroom instruction, but also workshops in the community, classes offered for non-credit, and curricula that focus on ways people can learn from the theory and research that communication scholars have to offer.

Overall, the translation process is important to our future. As this essay suggests, three components define the translation process. First, theory and research must target social problems (mundane or traumatic) to solve. Second, the solutions need to take into account the audience for whom the translation is intended. Third, the means of translating are necessary to consider because they change the kind of translation we do as scholars. As a package, these three elements help shape the effectiveness of scholarship translation. When we are successful translators of scholarship, we are able to show the practical use of our work and stand to enhance the importance we have in the academic community and in society as a whole. This issue offers five exemplars of why translation is critical and worthwhile to pursue. The authors maintain the integrity of their research while offering ways to improve the lives of others.

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