

Organizational communication and organisational communication: Binaries and the fragments of a field

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I employ personal narrative to help cast light on connections and tensions between organizational communication research, as produced in the United States, and organisational communication research, as produced in Aotearoa New Zealand. I address the issue by highlighting three sets of differences between these bodies of research: canonical, institutional and theoretical. I then unpack how these differences are apparent in my own university before sketching out three ways in which we might productively use such tensions to achieve radical engagement, and critique disciplinary others, identities, and locations.

KEYWORDS: difference, organizational communication, organisational communication

Introduction

I move the cursor across the screen until it hovers over the menu bar. I click on the orange Mozilla icon, the browser immediately opens a tab, and the world's most popular website flashes onto my screen. I type in the term *organizational communication* and click on the Google search button. Then, I open a new tab on the browser. The Google home page pops up again. This time, I expectantly enter the term *organisational communication*. As I type, Google suggests that I enter *organizational communication* instead of *organisational communication*. I disregard this unhelpful suggestion, click "search" and scan the search page. "Did you mean organizational communication?" Google asks querulously, and displays the top two hits for organizational communication before listing a series of pages that feature organisational communication.

The *organizational communication* search brings up the Wikipedia entry on the subject, followed by several others. It lists an Australian website as well, but the rest all appear to be American; although, the website www.organizationalcommunication.com. I suddenly realize, is the homepage for a textbook that I helped write, and is in fact currently hosted on the University of Waikato's server in New Zealand. The *organisational communication* search lists this, and the Wikipedia entry, before presenting the results of my search. I note immediately that, unlike the *organizational communication* search, most of the websites that feature *organisational communication* have extensions such as .au, .nz or .dk. Even though I know that Google parses its secret algorithm to privilege the relative location of the searcher on the web, I am pleased that New Zealand is showing up so prominently. I move on to the second search page, but not before Google crossly reminds me that I should have searched for *organizational communication*. To my amusement, the call for papers for this special issue is the first entry.

It is five o'clock in the morning, in early October 2009, and while I am delighted with the admittedly overheated metaphorical implications of my little experiment, I should

address why, instead of being in bed, I am running searches on Google for what at the end of the day are two rather obscure terms in cyberspace. There are two impulses that underlie the production of this text. The first is personal, and somewhat solipsistic. My desire to define and understand differences between *organiZational* communication and *organiSational* communication is intricately connected with my own spatio-temporal professional identity, as someone who grew up in India, was professionally trained in *organiZational* communication in the United States, and is currently working as an academic researcher and lecturer in *organiSational* communication in Aotearoa New Zealand. Second, as many have observed (Noy, 2009), academic disciplines inevitably and continually define and examine themselves, and their boundaries, spaces and methods of inquiry. Such self-examination and interrogation is critical in the development and construction of knowledge claims, and it is in this sense that disciplinary anxiety is very much at the heart of academic inquiry. For those who write and teach *organiSational* communication in Aotearoa New Zealand, such disciplinary anxiety is arguably facilitated by the very visible one-letter difference between the words *organiZation* and *organiSation*, since the presence of an American “Zee” in the middle of the word *organiZation* continually reiterates the historical roots and institutional origins of *organiZational* communication inquiry in the United States. The aim of this essay, then, is to assess how one might articulate differences and connections between *organiZational* and *organiSational* communication, reflect upon how such differences may have affected the trajectory of research in *organiSational* communication, and speculate about how we might productively re-imagine locationary differences and commitments. I begin by textualising my personal position as an *organiZational* communication scholar, before highlighting three sets of differences between *organiZational* and *organiSational* communication and discussing how such differences are spun out in my own department. I then talk about ways in which we might re-engage with these differences.

Personal Positions

Before all of this, a note on my purposeful use of the active subject in this essay is warranted. Autoethnographers have noted the highly tactical enterprise of using the first person in academic writing (Peterson & Langellier, 1997). Such tactics sometimes serve as confessional, in efforts to render texts transparent (van Maanen, 1988). However, the “I” that this essay evokes, unlike the fully-formed modern subject, is a textual, constructed and strategic “I,” designed to underscore the partiality, contingency and temporal quality not only of such insight as “I” have to offer, but of knowledge claims in general. My efforts at generating such texts are relatively recent (Ganesh, 2008; Ganesh, in press), but in many ways, as I do so, the voice with which I speak to myself draws from oral practices that stem back to my childhood: for instance, this voice evokes memories of stories that my grandmother told me; stories told in a voice that are at odds with the realist trope in which most of us write. So, in personalizing this text, I hope to both problematise realist tropes, and actualize what Ellis and Bochner (1996) have called the therapeutic function of research and writing.

I have had an uneven identity as an *organiZational* communication researcher. Unlike several contemporaries who obtained undergraduate and Master’s degrees in communication, defining an interest in organizational or management communication studies in the process and then embarking on a Ph.D. I qualified in sociology, went

on to a degree in social work, and left India to do my Ph.D. work in the United States intent on focusing upon media studies, in the form of analyzing new information technologies, and development and Non-government organizations (NGOs). The consolidation of my academic identity as an organizational communication scholar occurred through the twin processes of invitation and recruitment by mentors themselves embedded in organizational communication. For instance, it was Cynthia Stohl at Purdue University who, in a seminar on global networks in 1996 where I wrote a paper on global NGOs, persuaded me to take the ‘O’ in ‘NGO’ seriously. Later, Dennis Mumby was able to convince me that critical organizational communication studies were a good platform from which to conduct a critical analysis of new media technologies. However, for years I continued to be ambivalent about my core identity as someone who ‘did’ organizational communication research, as evidenced by the title of one of my comprehensive examinations: “A critical approach towards new media and organizations.” “I do org comm *and* new media,” I would say at conferences, or “I study development *and* org comm.” It was only after George Cheney recruited me to be an assistant professor of organizational communication at the University of Montana, where the bulk of my teaching and the entirety of my research were expected to be in the area of organizational communication, that I came to identify more substantively as an organizational communication scholar.

There were, of course, a myriad other ways in which I was increasingly invited and recruited into organizational communication. Attending conferences, first as an inarticulate doctoral student and newly minted PhD who befriended others like him, served to help create an informal cohort, albeit one with highly porous boundaries. Obtaining a Ph.D. at one of the historically central universities for organizational communication studies, itself afforded me access to a network of people who studied and taught organizational communication. By 2005, five years after finishing my doctorate, I had come to realize myself fully as an organizational communication scholar. And at this seemingly secure moment, I changed jobs and moved to New Zealand, inaugurating yet another minor geographical and professional identity crisis. The one-letter difference between organizational and organizational communication has, thus, assumed iconic proportions to me, as it has come to somehow represent my own shifts in location, perspective and practice. I present three of them below.

S and Z: Three Differences

My initial position vis-a-vis academic life in Aotearoa New Zealand was somewhere between a tourist and an immigrant. I was a tourist inasmuch as I was prone to interpret, in a quasi-imperial gesture, my encounters with colleagues, students, administrators and even scholarly research, with reference to my ‘home’ academic culture, and consequently, difference became a pivotal lens around which I organized the banality of everyday university life. For instance, I understood the 12-week semester in terms of its difference with the 15-week semester to which I was accustomed; the existence of an exam department in my university appeared unusual, even exotic, and I was bewildered by how easily it seemed that people in my department would lay claim to expertise in a range of different areas in communication studies. At the same time that I was a tourist, I was also an immigrant, for whom professional success and failure very much depended upon my ability to assimilate into this new academic life, and understand, enact and identify with institutional and professional expectations that

were almost entirely tacit. It is in this dual position of tourist/immigrant that three locational differences between organiSational communication and organiZational communication became salient to me. I see these differences as strategic, inasmuch as they are not essential, are articulated from my position, and functioned as much to create space for me as I transitioned into academic life in Aotearoa New Zealand. I will sketch out three such ‘strategic differentials’: canonical, institutional and theoretical.

Canonical Differences

As I mentioned at the outset, the roots of organiZational communication inquiry are well-known and documented in most textbooks (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2003), and indeed, they are American-centric to the extent that what is considered canonical organiZational communication scholarship is conducted largely by scholars who either write about the United States, are located in it, or have been trained in it. Indeed, the most comprehensive recent representation of this canon is a prominent five-volume compilation of what the editors describe as core and constitutive essays in organizational communication (Putnam & Krone, 2006). Not a single one of these essays is written by an organiZational communication scholar institutionally located outside North America, and the five volumes contain precisely two empirical studies conducted outside the United States.

On the other hand, organiSational communication studies have developed much more recently, and have been visible since the early 1990s, in terms of an emerging body of research, a disciplinary identity, and an institutional presence (Simpson & Zorn, 2004) distinct from more generic or interdisciplinary organiSational discourse studies. Yet, despite the proliferation of research on organiSational communication scholarship, one would be hard pressed to identify a series of articles or essays that constitute canonical scholarship in the area.

Institutional Differences

Like organiSational communication in Australia (More & Irwin, 2000), research on the subject in Aotearoa New Zealand has been based in business and management schools rather than schools or colleges of social sciences or liberal arts (Bernard, 2008). Such growth, it seems to me, has been rather fragmented, with researchers who ‘do’ organiSational communication studies located in a range of departments, such as industrial psychology or human resource management, in addition to departments of communication or public relations. Thus, several scholars have more tentative identity claims vis-à-vis *doing ‘org com’* and as I elaborate later, this may have resulted in organiSational communication studies being more organiSation-first than communication-first; perhaps the converse is true for organiZational communication studies.

The history of organiZational communication inquiry is much more documented. As Redding (1985) points out, what is now organiZational communication grew from a series of preoccupations in middle-American universities during and as an immediate consequence of the second world war, upon developing the capacity of the liberal arts to provide the military with technical communication skills. Organizational communication began to crystallize as a distinct field of inquiry from 1948-1958, when the first discernably ‘org comm’ PhD theses began to be produced on such

issues as managerial pragmatics, information transfer, and human relations. Research in the area was profoundly affected by the interpretive turn in the 1980s, and is now significantly concerned with issues of culture, power, voice and resistance (Mumby & Stohl, 1996).

Theoretical Differences

It appears to me that most work that is explicitly branded as organiSational communication is conducted almost exclusively from critical or qualitative points of view, much more so than in organiZational communication studies. There may be many reasons for this. For one, organiSational communication scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand, and also Australia, may have become a refuge for some disenchanted cultural studies and post-Marxist scholars who tend to gravitate inevitably towards qualitative inquiry. Another may be due to the fact that institutional spaces that allowed for the growth of organiSational communication occurred in the early to mid 1990s, when critical and interpretive approaches to organisational studies broadly speaking were in their ascendancy (Cheney, 2000). Certainly, the large proportion of often passionately critical scholars cannot be viewed as accidental, or even as a product of Kiwi nationalism. Finally, the growth in organiSational communication scholarship has closely paralleled the rise in what is now called “Critical Management Studies” (CMS) in the 1990s (Zald, 2002), a movement that began in multiple locations in Australasia, Europe and North America.

Identifying and articulating canonical, institutional and theoretical differences between organiZational and organiSational communication scholarship is an idiosyncratic and contestable task: what appears to be a fairly comprehensive list to me might also appear to be partial, flawed and ideological. For this tourist/immigrant, consolidating difference along these three lines has been rewarding because it has challenged core assumptions that inhere in my own professional training, and also provide me with a paradoxical outsider-insider perspective even as I work and practice organiSational communication. On the other hand, I am aware that considering disciplinary identity in terms of these differences can result in freezing and reifying academic positions and stifling dialogue rather than promoting it. Before unpacking this claim, let me turn to reviewing how my own current department is located with regard to the binary between organiSational and organiZational communication.

Consequences and Configurations: Locating Waikato

The three locational differences outlined above—canonical, institutional and theoretical—have cascaded into some interesting configurations of institutional and research emphases at the department of Management Communication at Te Whare Wānanga O Waikato (The University of Waikato). The department is a good focus for understanding and assessing the contours of organiSational communication research because it has a track record of producing significant international scholarship on the subject for at least fifteen years. It is also one of the larger communication departments in the country, with over thirteen full time staff, and it is arguably the largest hub of organiSational communication research in the country. Here, I present two consequences: an emphasis upon discourse as much as communication as a means of engaging organisational life; and an emphasis upon practice and engagement over

theory. As I do so, I summon a situated “we” to discuss the specific spatio-temporal features of the department.

Discourse and Communication

I find that a lot of critical inquiry in my department is influenced by Fairclough (1992), rather than by American traditions. Certainly, this may be due to the strong European and British influence at the Waikato Management School, as well as the influence of CMS at the school in general. In fact, our department has, at least until recently, explicitly branded itself as one that takes a critical approach to the study of management communication. The emphasis upon Fairclough-style critical discourse analysis is not restricted to our department; rather, it appears to be reflective of a trans-disciplinary uptake of critical discourse analysis in Aotearoa New Zealand by scholars in management. The move towards discourse analysis as a basis for organisational studies is also evident in Australian scholarship on the subject by such researchers as Hardy and associates (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004), and it is also evident in a range of other fields in Aotearoa New Zealand, including psychology, sociology, and education.

I have sometimes heard from other staff members in our university that my department seems to be an American outpost, and while my sometimes flippant response is to ask them whether they would prefer Eurocentrism or American Imperialism, in all seriousness I find that the department is in a remarkably productive position vis-a-vis organiZational communication scholarship precisely because of a larger occasional tension between organiZational communication and organiSational discourse. A recent special issue of the journal *Discourse and Communication* devoted to a discussion of the relationship between communication and discourse, referenced the tension in the form of a study of how scholars have represented the relationship between the two words, which made the claim: “scholars who prefer one of the two terms will react to the other with ambivalence or disdain, while others seek to depict their complementarity” (Jian, Schmissieur & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 299). A series of commentaries on the subject evidenced a range of authors expressing views favouring discourse over communication (Barker, 2008), communication and discourse as distinct yet highly related fields of study (Karreman & Alvesson, 2008; Putnam, 2008; Taylor, 2008), and those that professed ambiguity (Bargelia-Chiappini, 2008). After reviewing all publications produced since 2005, I find all three positions reflected in research produced at Waikato. This to me is a sign of latent eclecticism that passes under the radar when the department is characterised monolithically as an outpost of organiZational communication studies.

Engagement and Theory

A second configuration of organiSational communication scholarship at Waikato appears to be the relative emphasis given to theory: it seems to me that in some senses we have strained to perform theoretical work, whereas ‘application’ or ‘engagement’ with topics and issues has come relatively easily. It is almost as though the converse is true in the United States. Perhaps part of the explanation, as a reviewer of this essay suggested, lies in how our academic identities are constituted by disciplinary others, inasmuch as we expend energy justifying what we ‘do’ as researchers and teachers to

other academics; too often such legitimation work takes the form of demonstrating relevance to application and practice, which, when pushed to an extreme, descends into anti-intellectualism.

I believe that the fact that scholars in my department have not had to expend much energy in justifying a particular point of view on communication is at least partly related to the kinds of legitimation work that we have to perform regarding the uniqueness, distinctiveness and value of what we do. We are located in a school of management, and as such have to constantly argue as to why we belong there, why management students deserve to know about communication, and what we have to offer that other departments that study organisations do not. It seems to me from my experience in the United States, that organiZational communication scholars spent (and still spend) a significant amount of time making the argument that they were able to make a distinct and valuable contribution to communication theory and practice that did not exist in other domains of communication inquiry. However, here ‘communication’ is a label that my department has a sole identity claim on, and therefore we do not need to make explicit arguments for our unique ‘take’ on it.

In other words, organiZational communication studies is often constituted by its disciplinary others within the large and disparate field of communication studies—whether it be mass communication, interpersonal communication, cultural studies or rhetoric—whereas organiSational communication is constituted by disciplinary others in the increasingly free-ranging field of management studies, including organisational studies, strategic management and marketing. It is also in this sense that I think that organiSational communication scholarship here might often be more explicitly about organiSation than communication.

Perhaps as a result of this, combined with the fact that the only readily identifiable canons to place the department lie elsewhere, what our department of management communication actually ‘does’ is wide-ranging, eclectic and in some ways fragmented. We have scholars who have studied complexity and chaos, nanotechnology, biotechnology, genetic engineering, healthy food, sustainability, wellbeing, activism and leisure. There are good arguments to be made as to why communication scholars should study these subjects, but my point is that the tendency to reach out and embrace this range occurs at least partly because of a relatively implicit and unfetishised view of communication, and what it does.

Radical engagement

I hope I have shown that I find it occasionally productive to think in terms of an organiZational communication-organiSational communication binary not only because it helps me move away from a monolithic disciplinary identity forged largely in the United States, but because it has helped me understand why it is we work the way we have in the Waikato. However, I think that considering our identity purely in terms of such geographic reifications might actually prevent intellectual connections rather than create them. Among other places, some visible evidence of this appeared in a forum in the fourth issue of Vol. 19 of *Management Communication Quarterly*. The forum consisted of a provocation to a debate about the relationship between organizational communication research and its Antipodean counterparts (Prichard, 2006), and a range of responses to it. The importance of the *provocateur’s* questions have, I hope, been metaphorically underscored at the outset of this essay,

by Google's insistence on the spelling of organiZational communication. Prichard raised a series of claims about organiZational communication scholarship, arguing that it was simultaneously imperial and irrelevant to its antipodean counterparts in organisational studies (Prichard, 2006). While it is important to understand the geopolitics of academic knowledge production, both these arguments, I believe, unproductively reify location.

The imperialist argument connects the military-political dominance of the US with the dominance of American academics: with shifting global relationships, Prichard speculates about what might happen to the “junior partner, consumer and emulator of U.S. policy and agendas” (p. 639). The response to the question is that it is likely to become irrelevant. Prichard recollects a sense that he and the U.S. academics in the room were “moving past each other” (p. 640), notes that the audience in the room preferred the terms “organizational discourse ahead of organizational communication” (p. 640), and concludes that organiZational communication “internationally speaking is, to use Deleuze’s (1992) phrase, ‘in the archive.’ It is not what we, if I can use that pronoun loosely for the moment, are becoming” (p. 641).

Prichard’s construction of the disjuncture between U.S. style organiZational communication and the “organisational discourse” scholars in the room is an unproductive reification for several reasons. First, in attributing contemporary academic dominance predominantly to the United States, it fails to adequately account for the enormous baggage that the figure of Europe carries, especially in the colonial context of Aotearoa New Zealand, and at least some of this baggage is configured by the term organiSation. Unpacking that Eurocentric baggage in multicultural terms is critical if one is to consider the politics of academic locations fully, in terms of the larger global intellectual division of labour between the north and the south. Second, in characterizing and valorising organiSational discourse as non-American (which is how I read Prichard’s loose use of the word “we”), it both misses the current dominance of discourse analyses in organiZational communication research, and also overlooks potential productive tensions and confluences in the words ‘communication’ and ‘discourse’ themselves.

Of equal interest was the reaction to the essay, both formally in the responses in the forum, as well as at informal discussions that I have had in subsequent years, on the part of organiZational communication scholars, who have framed their reactions to the essay in terms of puzzlement and sometimes even hurt, given their own motives and efforts. To me, these reactions resonate with an impulse that I have heard constructed in the form of a call thus: “organiZational communication needs to move out, and to engage further with the (globalised) world outside the US borders.” Such calls, I believe, can paradoxically serve to re-inscribe the boundaries of organiZational communication to the extent that they continue to be identity-oriented and thus monological. Conversely, calls could approach radical engagement to the extent that they enable scholars to deconstruct their disciplinary identities, reconfigure what counts as an academic canon, and create entirely new dialogic configurations of scholarship.

Despite the recent ossification of location in debates about what counts or does not count as organiZational communication, and in which nations such scholarship resides (see also Mumby & Ashcraft, 2006), there are some immediate matters of import from these debates for researchers, teachers and practitioners of organiSational

communication that sit well with the editors' call to ask contributors to address the question "what are the implications for organisational communication scholars of being based in Aotearoa New Zealand?" In addressing this question, I would like to take recourse to a loose, generic, inclusive "we" that transcends the organiSational communication-organiZational communication binary. It is obvious from my arguments above that one implication might be to consider how we ourselves could attempt to move towards radical engagement, creating productive connections with multiple sites of scholarly inquiry and reflective practice, instead of restricting our choices to either American or European traditions. One way of moving towards radical engagement is, paradoxically, to continue to contemplate a binary between organiSational communication and organiZational communication. Such ironic contemplation is helpful in at least two ways.

First, we need to continue to understand and critique how our unique locations constantly interact with our irrevocably post-global identities as scholars. The organiZational communication-organiSational communication tension is one that we ought to continue to consider, not because we need to protest the injustices of American academic imperialism, but because this tension can enable a critique about our politics of location as organiSational communication researchers constituted by our own institutional politics, deconstruct our own privileges as relatively well paid, English-speaking, highly educated members of the chattering classes, and interrogate with greater care how our professional and disciplinary identities and anxieties are constructed by disciplinary others (Prichard, 2005). Further, contemplating the binary might also help us be more reflexive about what it means when we, in our own academic practices, might enter into what appear to be dominant academic discourses and canons – an issue metaphorically illustrated by the shadow of an Australian and New Zealand website in my Google search for organiZational communication.

Second, it is also productive to continue to understand the tension between organiZational communication and organiSational communication with reference to other emerging tensions and collaborative possibilities, of late, and most noticeably, between the words 'discourse' and 'communication.' Doing so will help us remain ironic about these multiple binaries, given that their constant comparison will help prevent them from being reified. More importantly, if we orient ourselves in this tension-laden manner toward the possibility for radical engagement, in the form of allowing ourselves to be influenced by, and engage in dialogic understanding with multiple locations, we will realize the potential of the multicultural specificity of our own unique locations and subject positions, which in turn lends itself to drawing from research and practice, not only in Europe and North America, but also from scholarship based in Asia, Africa, and any number of other places throughout the world.

And finally, I think it is important that we de-radicalize the idea of radical disciplinary engagement itself, cease to see it as an impossible ideal, and understand it as part of our everyday practice as intellectuals, teachers and practitioners. It seems to me that there have been many, many productive and quieter exchanges, collaborations, dialogues, friendships and crossings between organiSational communication and organiZational communication studies. I ask myself what has made these connections so organic, natural and *inevitable*, and my answer is that these spaces have not required any assertions of geographical disciplinary identity, autonomy or control. In fact, it may be that the brouhaha over boundary work and boundary crossing exists precisely because

so much attention is drawn to it, even when that assertion expresses its self-defeat or attempts to celebrate increasing fragmentation in organizational communication studies (Poole, Putnam, & Seibold, 1997).

Could it be, then, that the most dialogic, the most productive, the most luminous of our spatial connections occur when one forgets to work with such things as organization and organization? Whereas at one level, institutional configurations make such forgetting impossible, at another, these spaces have always existed: they are constructed every time a conference is held, every time an article is written, every time a seminar convenes, every time we draw from non-canonical scholarship as we conduct research. It could be, then, that our best moments are when we are most fragmented, when we are either amnesiacs about our academic identities, or better yet, displace them as we seek to explain problems worth solving, and engage with issues that need attention.

An earlier generation of scholarship talked about ‘ferment in the field’ (see *Ferment in the Field*, 1983) and scholars since then have bemoaned ‘fragmentation in the field’ (Putnam, 2001). It is such resultant fragments, scattered around the world, that I want to draw our attention to: whether these fragments be the very notion of organizational communication scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand itself that emerges when we scroll down a Google search page; our own unique appropriations of tensions, metonyms, identities and articulations of ‘communication’ and ‘discourse;’ the mention of our work in unexpected places or texts; or even our sustained attention to and critique of matters of our own location. I for one am tentatively learning to revel in these fragments, and play with them, and spend a lot more energy in doing what I want to do, attempting to understand issues that I see as important, and in doing so learn to decentre rather than define the field to which I think I belong. Perhaps I have had the recent institutional luxury of being able to do this. But perhaps the pervasive unevenness of my professional identity that I have alluded to has also saved me, in a sense, from professional dogma. Ultimately, I hope that as I consider these fragments, I also finally consider what they crystallize, and in doing so, better appreciate both life and my place in it.

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