

‘THOSE WHO TEACH’ AND ‘THOSE WHO DO’:  
BRIDGING THE DIVIDE THROUGH ENGAGED COMMUNICATION SCHOLARSHIP

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In preparation for this conference on organizational communication and scholarly engagement, I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on the experiences and knowledge I have gained as an organizational communication scholar and a teacher of all things ‘org. comm.’ And through this self-reflection process, several key moments surfaced as pivotal turning points in my career as student, teacher, researcher and practitioner. One salient experience involves my mother. A teacher herself, I suppose she has the innate ability to spot others with the propensity to educate and seek out learning opportunities as she once told me, “there are those who can teach and those who can’t, do.” Of course I have heard variations of this phrase from the opposite standpoint (“Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.”) but the common theme behind both of these statements is that ‘teaching’ and ‘doing’ are inherently different processes and a polar separation exists between teacher and practitioner (one cannot possibly assume both roles simultaneously). I think this is one of the greatest challenges organizational communication scholars face with regard to engaged scholarship – the tension between teacher and practitioner and the bridging of these conflicting roles through research. We are compelled to teach and research all things organizational in an academic environment and simultaneously maintain loose or tight connections with organizational members in a practicing or ‘doing’ environment.

Indeed, this very issue was discussed at the Alta Conference just last year on the final day of dialogue when the notion of engagement was addressed by attending scholars. Several participants offered questions regarding the role conflict and allegiance issues organizational communication scholars are faced with as teachers, researchers and practitioners and a few suggestions were made in an effort to bridge these roles. I was struck by one particular suggestion to maintain or establish connections with former students as this constituency could be viewed as a cohort of boundary spanners of sorts. After all, many alumni have taken the leap from academia to industry and understand what that transition entails. And many of these same alumni have taken that leap multiple times as they transition back to academia for advanced degrees and professional certificates. In this regard, former students as practicing members of for-profit, nonprofit, governmental, nongovernmental and social organizations are conducting the everyday work and communication processes we seek to examine in bridging the gap between ‘teaching’ and ‘doing.’ These former students and current practitioners take risks, assimilate to organizational cultures, experience downsizing and layoffs and the effects of a failing economy first hand, are members of bona fide work groups, they are leaders and followers and ultimately represent opportunities for organizational communication researchers to permeate the boundaries of academia and industry with relative ease.

An example of bridging the divide between teachers and ‘doers’ through engaged scholarship involves the Alumni Advisory Board established in 1996 in the Department of Communication (then Speech Communication) at Texas A&M University. Dr. Linda Putnam served as founding faculty member of the board and director for several years, and established this esteemed group of alumni with the purpose of facilitating dialogue between communication undergraduates and former students – thus fostering the connection between academia and industry. Several additional benefits surfaced from this board as members ultimately took on the responsibility of creating academic scholarships for communication undergraduates, donating time and money to departmental endeavors at large and coordinating professional workshops for communication majors educating them on success and survival tactics in the ‘real world’ after graduation. Board members represent a variety of careers including knowledge management for a communications company, public relations for a global oil company, owning and operating a nonprofit organization, executives within a technology firm, political leaders and activists, a variety of sales positions, teachers, recruiters, etc. This board has existed and contributed to the department and the discipline of communication for more than a decade, and has participated in dialogue concerning current streams of thought in the subdiscipline of organizational communication and current practices in modern organizations. Thus, groups such as these serve as openings for organizational scholars to engage practitioners, ‘doers’ or modern organizational members and collaborate on research endeavors exploring the many communication processes that drive organizational communication scholarship.

Although the model of alumni involvement represented at Texas A&M is an effective one, it certainly isn’t the only method for fostering connections between academia and industry through alumni relationships. As the alumni contact person in TCU’s Department of Communication Studies, I have implemented several communication strategies in an attempt to connect with or engage former communication studies students. For example, an online alumni survey was conducted three years ago that allowed departmental members to gauge how alumni were using their communication degrees as practitioners. A great deal of information (both qualitative and quantitative) was analyzed and results demonstrated that graduates represented a variety of positions (primarily sales, law, health, management and education), that many of these graduates attained advanced degrees or professional certificates and that the majority of these graduates felt as though they used the education they gained as communication students on an everyday basis. Furthermore, it was no surprise that the course seen as most relevant to their current job positions was organizational communication. Additionally, through this survey I was able to gather information regarding alumni involvement with the department, the amount of contact alumni would like to maintain, and ideas offered by former students that could augment departmental progress and ultimately enhance the quality of their degrees. One suggestion included the creation of a Facebook profile for communication studies graduates. Currently this profile maintains around 100 friends (including TCU faculty and staff) and alumni can elect to add information to the profile for networking purposes.

These are only a few examples of how organizational scholars can begin to cultivate a connection between academia and industry through the establishment and maintenance of relationships with former students. I am by no means an expert on this particular topic, but I found it highly relevant at the Alta Conference last summer and would appreciate continued discussion on ways organizational scholars can rely on alumni relationships and experiences to bridge the divide between teachers and ‘doers’ through engagement. On a final note, in reviewing the engagement materials provided by several of the leaders of this conference, I

couldn't help but notice that Dr. Tompkins' journey as an organizational communication scholar was developed in part by the relationships he established with former undergraduate and graduate students and the many mentoring opportunities he created. Thus the idea of bridging the divide between 'those who teach' and 'those who do' by connecting with students and former students is not necessarily a new one. However, as Dr. Tompkins and Dr. Putnam have demonstrated, it seems to be a very effective means for scholarly engagement and a topic worthy of conversation in developing current models of organizational engagement.