



Integrating Theory into Skills-Based Communication Courses

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Abstract

A persistent gap often separates researchers and practitioners in journalism and mass communication with theory and applied work existing in distinct silos. This article illustrates how theory can be effectively integrated into courses, even if skills-based, to enhance students' understanding of theory's practical utility. I provide an overview of the integration of three journalism and mass communication theories – agenda setting, social cognitive theory, and the elaboration likelihood model– into a class session and outline a strategy of using students' own data and behaviors to demonstrate those theories' central hypothesis or tenets. By infusing theory into skills-based courses, which predominately shape undergraduate programs, students can gain a holistic understanding of the field which may ultimately help bridge the theory-practice divide.

Communicators have long understood the importance of both theoretical and applied work, yet a disconnect often persists between researchers and practitioners (Moser, 2016). While at a conference in 2018, I listened to a panel of communicators, policy makers, and scientists discuss fracking, a topic I was presenting on later that day. Yet, throughout the talk, I never heard a mention of the prolific theoretical research being done in that area. I, a naïve graduate student at the time, asked in the Q&A how they were using theory to address the issue. I will always remember the quick, “We’re not.” That interaction was not unique. Over the years, I’ve spoken to several colleagues with similar, if not identical, experiences. The disunity between theory and practice transcends beyond academic and industry professionals and occurs in our own universities, where silo mentalities exist between

research faculty and professors of practice (Montgomery & Smith, 2015). Practitioners can undervalue the usefulness of theory, and researchers can be out of touch with practitioners’ day-to-day realities (Valentino & Juanico, 2020).

When preparing to teach a new course on strategic communication writing, I scoured the internet to see how others were teaching it and similar courses. As I delved into syllabi from universities across the country, a notable pattern emerged: none had a module or session dedicated to the theory and research behind effective writing. For context, the course was to teach strategic writing (e.g., for public relations, advertising, and digital marketing) to journalism and mass communication students. As a skills-based course, I understood why most modules were operational in nature, such as how to structure a press release. Yet, an

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understanding of why our writing is effective and its potential impact on readers was consistently missing. In essence, we were teaching the *what* and *how* but neglecting the *why* and *to what effect*. The degree to which theory and practice relates depends on exposure to theory in the first place and a lack of deliberate effort to bridge the two in the classroom, where future practitioners and scholars are learning and developing their work norms, only increases the theory-practice divide.

A Class of Theory Using Research

In response, I have created a theory-driven module that I teach every semester, regardless of course topic. This module, typically taught in a single class session, does not distract from the applied nature of a course but offers students a deeper understanding of theories that will influence their work, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. The module uses student data to demonstrate the real-world relevance of theories, making them tangible and relatable to students. The aim is to provide them first-hand experience of how theory can predict and explain beliefs and behaviors. To that end, I have students complete a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester testing hypotheses of popular theories that are later integrated into the module lecture.

I will specifically outline how three theories have been successfully integrated: agenda-setting theory, social cognitive theory, and the elaboration likelihood model. These theories were chosen due to their applicability to journalism and strategic communication students. For example, understanding why the news impacts the public's understanding of issues addresses many of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) values. Additionally, for strategic communicators tasked with persuading audiences, these theories can offer insights into enhancing their success.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory suggests that the media can bolster the perceived importance of an issue through frequent and prominent coverage (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the questionnaire, students are asked to read and rate the effectiveness of five headlines that have been manipulated to make salient either environmental or foreign policy concerns. Afterward, following standard agenda-setting research practices (Coleman *et al.*, 2009), students report how important they

think different issues are to the nation. Unsurprisingly, those who read the environment-salient headlines have often rated climate change as more important than international relations, and vice versa for those exposed to the foreign policy headlines. A class discussion is then held on the power of mass media in forming public opinion and why media relations is thus so critical to public relations practitioners.

Social Cognitive Theory

An integral component of social cognitive theory, a theory of social learning, is that a person's perceived ability in completing a task (i.e., self-efficacy) will influence subsequent beliefs and behavior (Bandura, 2001). Early in the questionnaire, I provide a class overview stating writing to be "mostly intuitive, a natural skill," thereby reducing self-efficacy, or "a skill that can be learned and maintained," thus bolstering self-efficacy. Later, students indicate how well they anticipate doing in the course ("below average" to "above average"). As predicted, those primed with lower self-efficacy tend to anticipate lower performance than those given a positive self-efficacy message. This data is used to demonstrate the importance and underlying reason for cues to action (CTAs) as they can be a way to exert self-efficacy into a message. That is, providing an explicit CTA can increase behavioral compliance by increasing one's self-efficacy (Chang, 2016). It should be noted that after the questionnaire is completed, all students receive a positive self-efficacy message to override any potential negative effects of the low self-efficacy course description. Although this exercise is not meant to manipulate students' emotions, gaining Institutional Review Board approval is recommended.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) is a theory of attitude change that has long been used to explain how heuristics, or mental shortcuts, impact decision making (Petty & Briñol, 2011). In short, the ELM predicts a person to rely on heuristics if unable or unmotivated to process information thoroughly. To demonstrate the ELM, I bring candy to class, mixing a bag of popular American candy, like Hershey's, with an imported candy, like Mantecol. For half of the class, I ask them to choose a candy bar as quickly as possible. For the other half, I let them explore the basket before choosing. What we tend to find is that when given the chance to explore the options,

students are more willing to choose a candy they are unfamiliar with, yet when crunched for time, they will revert to what is familiar. This is called the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). We see heuristics and other biases, such as a source credibility bias, play out in all forms of mass media messages, where audiences are guided toward a certain belief system or behavior due to well-versed assumptions (i.e., a doctor's coat signifies credibility). This activity tends to be a class favorite as we attempt to identify heuristic cues in real-world communication, all while eating candy.

Evaluation and Implications

Having taught this module for several years now, in different courses and institutions, there have been consistent results. First, students have an interest in understanding the “why” in addition to the “how.” Our discussion on theory is often the liveliest of the semester as students critically evaluate the underlying theoretical principles common in mass media messages. Relatedly, teaching theory in a skills-based course can benefit student work. Learning about the practical implications of theory can motivate students to apply more critical thinking and utilize theory-based principles when crafting their own messages. Lastly, by using student's own data, third-person effects are mitigated, further showcasing the pervasiveness of communication theory in our daily lives. One student noted (2020), “I totally thought I knew what you were doing but then it turns out, I'm just like everyone else.” Semesters are often jam-packed with required course material, yet even one class integrating theory into a course can dramatically change how students perceive course concepts. The specific theories covered can be tailored to fit the specific student base and course topic.

I recognize that many programs introduce theory in a theory-specific course or as part of an introduction into the field, but intentionally integrating theory into all courses, whether applied or theoretical, can further promote a holistic and well-rounded education. In result, students are further equipped with not only practical knowledge but also an understanding of the underlying mechanisms at play. Indeed, theory may not be as distant from practice as many practitioners believe but rather serve as a mechanism to help future journalists and communicators engage in critical thinking and in honing their skills. As Lewin has famously quoted, “nothing is so practical as a good theory” (1943, p. 118).

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