

Article

Keeping up with Industry: Understanding the Evolving Professional Communication Needs in Asia

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Received: 2 April, 2024/Received in revised form: 11 September, 2024/Accepted: 22 October, 2024/Available online: 10 March, 2025

Abstract

The Asian workplace is a dynamic environment with ever-evolving contexts and fast-paced changes (Du-Babcock & Bhatia, 2013; Tonby et al., 2020). Asia has also been mistakenly viewed as one market with one context and culture when in fact it is diverse and distinct in each country and region (McCorkindale et al., 2021; Du-Babcock, 2018). Professional communication in these Asia markets should not only be personalised but also localised and constantly updated. This creates an exciting opportunity for educators designing and teaching professional communication courses to consider the most relevant and important principles during the curriculum design and for faculty to consider how they would facilitate discussions that stimulate active learning and critical thinking (Boyer, 1990). There is, hence, a need to consider how professional communication specialists can keep up with industry changes, shifting communication needs and evolving expectations of the Asia workplace to inform curriculum design and teaching (Al-Musalli, 2019; Winchester-Seeto & Piggott, 2020) and how professional communication faculty can deepen and refresh their disciplinary, sub-disciplinary and interdisciplinary understanding in the backdrop of evolving Asian business contexts.

This conceptual paper uses the scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching (Boyer, 1990) as a framework to suggest ways in which professional communication specialists can continually develop their understanding of the professional communication discipline in the context of Asia. Insights drawn could potentially contribute to the professional development of faculty which will in turn have an impact on curricula that prepare students for communication at the workplace.

Keywords

Professional development, professional communication, Asia

1 Introduction

1.1 Professional communication

Professional communication has been used interchangeably with other terms such as business communication, technical communication and workplace communication but in general can be understood as the use of semiotic resources such as spoken or written words, gestures, images and objects in the academic and professional contexts (Bhatia & Bremner, 2014) but there are narrower definitions of professional communication. This section aims to explore the sub-disciplinary relationships as well as the interdisciplinary relationships and those that affect the Asian business context before suggesting, in the next section, more practical approaches for faculty to develop their expertise and keep up-to-date with the latest developments by using Boyer's (1990) scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching as a framework for the professional development of faculty teaching professional communications in an Asian context.

1.2 Interdisciplinary understanding

According to Dubinsky and Gretchel (2021), professional communication is made up of two fields – Business communication and Technical communication and it has also been argued to be made up of sub-disciplinary contexts that include management communication, corporate communication, organisational and institutional communication that can be internal or external (Bhatia & Bremner, 2014).

Business communication and Technical communication differ in that the latter is “shaped by the relationship between tools, technicians and users” and focuses on making implied knowledge explicit (Shelton, 2020) but business communication places the understanding of organisational cultures and genres at the foreground and the tools, technicians and users in the background (Bhatia & Bremner, 2014). Though Business communication and Technical communication seem related, they are, in fact, unique and are not interchangeable (Dubinsky & Gretchel, 2021). For example, technical writing involves the ability to explain mechanical or scientific complexities to users in the form of user documentation but business writing focuses on communicating in organisations and workplace settings within systems of commerce (Kynell, 1999; Dubinsky & Gretchel, 2021). Professional communication faculty cannot assume that skills from one sub-discipline or context can be applied without adaptations to another so educators must hone their ability to see the distinctions within the fields that compose professional communication.

As a whole, professional communication has been argued to be more aligned with the discipline of English with a more humanities perspective (Sullivan and Porter, 1993) though its “tension” and “challenging relationship” with business has been acknowledged (Dubinsky & Gretchel, 2021). Furthermore, the practice of rhetorical theory in workplace settings can be seen in professional writing. Rhetoric builds “on the notion that language matters” and is intentional communication used to convey ideas effectively and promote understanding so as to influence how people think and act (Bennetch, Owen & Keeseey, 2022; McCroskey, 2015). Though some Rhetoric and Composition scholars question “the humanity of business and capitalism”, they acknowledge that rhetoric takes place in the context of business and the workplace (Sullivan and Porter, 1993). Studies have also shown that rhetorical awareness of those at different stages of their career can be on a continuum (Leydens, 2008) and rhetorical analysis can be helpful for undergraduates in acquiring effective professional writing skills (Bhatia & Bremner, 2014).

1.3 Further understanding in the Asian business context

Beyond understanding professional communications in general, it is also useful to have interdisciplinary understanding of business studies and Asian studies to better understand “regional geo-strategic

complexities” and be able to guide students to develop “authentic and enduring business relationships” (Cullen & McCornac, 2023, p. 9) in varying and evolving context within Asia (Du-Babcock & Bhatia, 2013; Tonby et al, 2020). Though people often view Asia as one market and one context with a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 2011) and high-context communication styles (Hall, 1976), this is not always true. Asian countries and regions have a variety of languages and cultures with varying definitions of ‘Asian values’ among advocates and government ideologies (Robison, 1996). They are also at different stages of economic development and global exposure (McCorkindale et al., 2021; Du-Babcock, 2018) with various parts of Asia adapting differently to the discovery of new cultures and business practices. Furthermore, there are cultural differences between Asians “who use both their first language and second language in global business communication” (Du-Babcock & Bhatia, 2013) and also other generational and gender nuances in Asia (McCorkindale et al., 2021; McCann & Giles, 2006; Abdul Malek & Jaguli, 2018). Hence, the understanding of communication practices “need(s) to be updated in line with present practice” and in specific contexts (Du-Babcock, 2018). On top all of this, industry developments in Asia have been expedited by technology enabled “leapfrogging” (Tonby et al., 2020) so educators need to be constantly aware of the evolving business contexts that graduates are expected to navigate in.

2 Boyer’s Scholarly Engagement

Using Boyer (1990)’s scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching as a framework, this paper suggests practical ways in which communication specialists can raise their sub-discipline and interdisciplinary awareness and continually refresh and align their understanding of industry and communication in the Asian context.

2.1 Scholarship of discovery

Discovery is closely related to research and awareness within academia and beyond. The understanding within academia include an awareness of sub-disciplines and interdisciplinary relationships as well as the awareness beyond academia which include an understanding of various business and technical contexts. This is supported by Boyer’s (1990) argument that the scholarship of discovery is closely related to research and requires “disciplined, investigative efforts within the academy” as well as Dubinsky and Gretchell (2021)’s reinforcement that the most critical component “beyond programs and infrastructure is research” with consideration for “government, professional and industrial situations”. Rhetorical communication which requires the ability to understand the audience before influencing them is key (Bennetch, 2022) so an understanding of the audience in the broader Asian workplace and more localised context is imperative.

In order to gain such awareness and understanding, professional communication specialists need to keep abreast of the latest academic developments in the field and can do so by joining reading circles (Ramlo & McConell, 2008), taking part in journal peer reviews or by independently reading specific journals like the *International Journal of Business Communication*, *Business and professional communication quarterly*, *Technical communication quarterly*, the *Journal of communication management*, the *International Journal of strategic communication* and the *Journal of education for business*. To have more understanding of the Asian contexts, professional communication specialists can read the *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, the *Global Advances in Business Communication Journal* and the *Asian Journal of Communication*.

For more workplace context, educators can consider joining professional bodies and business associations such as the Association for Business communication, the International Association of Business communicators which has a focus on the Asia/ Pacific region, the Asia- Pacific Association of Communications Directors and even the Institute of Public Relations which developed the 2021 “IPR future of communications in Asia” report.

Since a focus on academic papers alone to investigate and advance knowledge may not be sufficient because of a lack in representation and timeliness of Asian reports, it is helpful to look beyond academia to read market reports from bodies such as consultancy firms like McKinsey & Company, Deloitte and Price Waterhouse Coopers (Cullen & McCornac, 2023) and join industry conferences and tradeshows. For more up-to-date and localised understanding, educators can take part in online Asian business forums and actively seek opportunities to network with industry professionals and human resource practitioners. They can also leverage on the alumni activities of the universities they came from and are teaching at which may invite industry speakers and/or create networking opportunities with local or Asian businesses. Educators in Asia could also join cultural associations, local chambers and community groups to understand regional and local economic development and the impact of global exposure on business communication in their context as well as learn more about the communication styles in large-family owned business conglomerates (e.g. ‘chaebols’ in Korea and “keiretsu” in Japan) and small-family owned businesses in Asia. Not only do they grow their knowledge of business practices and communication styles, they also get to experience mingling with locals that may provide opportunities to observe cultural behaviours such as how direct people are verbally (i.e. low-context vs high-context cultures), how they use non-verbal cues to encode messages, whether they use upgraders or down graders when they speak (e.g. totally, absolutely vs maybe, sort) and if they remain polite and can be seen maintaining harmony (Ursu & Ciortescu, 2021; Meyer, 2014). These speech styles also reveal collaborative versus individualistic culture patterns. Collaborative cultures tend to be high-context especially during confrontations where face saving is important and surface agreement is valued. The group is often considered an entity and solidarity is held in high regard (Meyer, 2014). On the other hand, high-context individuals in collaborative cultures tend to view time as flexible/ polychronic and place less emphasis on punctuality if the overall aim is achieved. This is in contrast with low-context individuals who see time as linear/ monochronic and place emphasis on following schedules and meeting deadlines (Meyer, 2014). Not only can educators learn from industry connections and alumni members, educators can also learn from students on their internships and job attachments by having interviews, focus group discussions and surveys on communication behaviours observed in different types of companies like multinational companies, small-medium enterprises, large conglomerates and government agencies (McKenna, 2019; Nanda, et al., 2021 may)

With knowledge from multiple sources, professional communication specialists can then think freely and with fresh lenses (Boyer, 1990).

2.2 Scholarship of integration

The scholarship of integration takes place when professional communication specialists are able to put “things into perspective” and “give meaning to isolated facts”. With an understanding of multiple disciplines, successful educators are able to make connections and even provide “new insight... on original research” (Boyer, 1990) and by extension, this paper argues that they can make connections within and beyond the inner workings of academia to the outer workings of industry.

Within academia, discussions regarding shared domains with other university departments where professional communication is taught can be encouraged and can benefit all parties (Dubinsky & Gretchel, 2021). For example, business communication knowledge in specific cultural settings resides in communication departments and not English departments. Specific writing and rhetorical expertise lie in English departments and not communication departments. Discussions on various theories/ frameworks and shared domains can encourage more integration of understanding.

Beyond academia, professional communication specialists could bring in their own work experiences, observations and perspectives about the business or technical world and integrate them with their interdisciplinary knowledge that include communication, cultural and contextual understanding but this can be strengthened further with collaborations with industry.

University-industry collaborations allow for more timely information through joint research projects or even equity holdings in companies (Ankrah & Omah, 2015). This allows access to knowledge and contexts beyond theories and academia. According to Matkovic et al. (2014), there are five categories of university -industry interactions that can take place (p. 4115 – p. 4116):

1. Meetings and conferences
2. Consultancy and contract research
3. Creation of physical facilities and in-kind support
4. Teaching and Training
5. Joint Research

This can be especially helpful for professional communication specialists attempting to understand the evolving Asian workplace by providing them with opportunities to interact with industry counterparts who may communicate differently because of their culture and by providing access to data and contextual information through consultancy work, contract research or joint research in the Asian contexts. This collaboration can be mutually beneficial as industry taps on the academic's expertise in research such as the framing of questions and the use of data-driven processes to gather empirical evidence while the academic can show the practical benefits of their theoretical work while gaining more practical insights through their research (Powell et al., 2018). Both benefit from closer ties and strengthened reputations (Dickfos, 2019). Furthermore, industry members can be invited to critique curriculum especially those with varied experiences in local or international contexts, government or private entities including multi-national companies or small-medium enterprises as well as those who have worked with different generations and gender profiles in Asia. The knowledge gained also allows educators to create specialised life-long learning programmes for industry that are customised and localised for their needs (Matkovic et al., 2014).

2.3 Scholarship of application

Beyond discovery and integration, educators should look for opportunities to apply what they know (Boyer, 1990). This can be done through contract or joint-research with industry (Matkovic et al., 2014) or through their own research in professional communications in Asia, discussions at relevant conferences and honing their understanding through the peer review process when publishing in journals. For example, Wu (2006) re-examined Hofstede's findings about cultural dimensions in eastern and western cultures (1984) by collecting data from Taiwan and the United States 30 years later and found that "work-related cultural values in a specific culture" can change over time because of political, societal and economic environment changes. Wu found that Taiwanese participants had a lower power distance cultural value (medium) compared to Hofstede's previous study (medium/high), higher uncertainty avoidance values (high vs medium), slightly higher values on masculinity (medium vs medium/low) and lower collectivism value (medium high vs high). Wu (2006) expanded on Hofstede's cultural dimensions by exploring the Confucian work dynamic, a non-western cultural dimension, and found that Taiwanese participants had a high score while US participants had a medium score on it though the "work ethic of persistence" is recognised by both cultures (Wu, 2006). Studies such as this allow for application and deepening of understanding in evolving contexts.

Educators could also actively look for opportunities to provide consultancy services, seek industrial attachments (Ahmad & Abd Rashid, 2011; Njenga, 2023) or "communication faculty internships" (Gibson, 2001) with companies ranging from local SMEs (small-medium enterprises) to MNCs (multinational companies), and even look into starting their own businesses or go into partnerships with the support of their universities. Dickfos (2019) argued that there were multiple benefits for academic staff who took part in "pracademic experiences", a blend of professional practice with academic theory and knowledge, and one such benefit is the awareness of critical gaps in the curriculum

and parts of the curriculum that need to be kept up-to-date and relevant especially in the evolving Asian workplace.

2.4 Scholarship of teaching

“Teaching begins with what the teacher knows” (Boyer, 1990) and that is why educators need to be well-informed, widely read, open to new experiences and have a desire for professional development (Dickfos, 2019).

Professional communication faculty need to keep up with industry changes, shifting communication needs and evolving expectations of the job market to inform curriculum design (Al-Musalli, 2019; Winchester-Seeto & Piggott, 2020) and customise curriculum to specific Asian contexts. They can collaborate with subject and communication experts within academia (Young, 1999) or collaborate with industry (Matkovic et al, 2014) in an ongoing, iterative process to accurately reflect what professionals are currently doing and to focus on preparing students for the future (Dickfos, 2019).

Beyond the subject knowledge, the teaching pedagogy used is also strategic and should “relate to the subject taught” to stimulate active learning and critical thinking (Boyer, 1990). Experiential learning has been argued to provide deeper learning opportunities (Ruhanen, 2006) when supported with authentic materials (Dickfos, 2019) framed in the Asian context. This leads to more discussions that could lead to the voicing of different perspectives and more critical conversations especially in a multi-cultural context which can in turn benefit the students and the educator. Hence, the scholarship of teaching contributes to the growth of the professional communication tutor through collaboration and discussions with others.

3 Conclusion

In all, professional communication faculty should constantly be acquiring knowledge and awareness through research (discovery), synthesis (integration), practice (application) and teaching (Boyer, 1990). This process is an iterative journey for the educator as they continually grow their knowledge of the discipline of professional communication, the sub-disciplines of business and technical communication, the interdisciplinary relationships between business studies, Asian studies, professional communication and fields like rhetoric, and the nuances in communicating in various Asian business contexts influenced by different stages of economic, social and political development. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should encourage and empower professional communication faculty to continually grow their understanding by providing support through research collaboration opportunities, funding for academic and industry conferences, and opportunities to take part in consultancy work and industrial attachments to keep up with industry changes and shifting communication needs at the Asian workplace.

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