

FROM PAGE TO PRACTICE

From Page to Practice:  
Communication Theory and Its Value for Public Relations Educators and Practitioners

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**Abstract**

A robust scholarly discussion had been conducted for more than 30 years on the professional impact of theory on communication practice, including Vocate's important observation in 1997 that a rigorous education in theory creates "learnable intelligence" in professional communicators. However, the question of the actual professional impact of studying communication theory has not been asked of those best positioned to judge—communication practitioners who have rigorously studied communication theory. This research attempts to determine whether learning theory actually has affected practice among communication professionals who have explicitly studied theory in pursuit of a master's degree in professional communication. As well, this research examines a linked issue in Canada—whether theory is being taught in practical post-secondary public relations programs. Following the latter question this research examines a pedagogical approach at the community college level towards teaching theory relevant to a professional setting. Finally, it examines the link between communication theory and the evolution of the critical communication professional.

Key words: theory, theory-praxis, learnable intelligence, critical professional, practical pedagogy

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## **Chapter One—Introduction**

Fifteen years of direct observation as a participant in the public relations industry has left me confident that few public relations (PR) practitioners in Canada consciously utilize communication or public relations theory in their professional practice. That is not surprising. At the more experienced levels of PR practice the practitioners have probably not formally been educated in communication or public relations theory; it likely was not available to them when they studied at the university or college level. University education in public relations —at which exposure to theory would be expected—is a relatively new development in Canada.

At a more junior or practical level, public relations practitioners probably have studied public relations formally; 36 educational institutions in Canada now offer training in PR ranging from one-year to three-year diploma programs, post-graduate certificate programs and a few baccalaureate programs (See Appendix A). The majority of these programs are offered at community colleges across the country. Yet, even among the practitioners educated in these professional training schools, few have studied or consciously use communication or public relations theory in their practice; communication and public relations theory are not widely included in an explicit way in the course loads of most of the programs from which they have graduated.

This is particularly the case at the level at which most new practitioners are trained—the community college level. This is not an oversight: it is a function of the purely practical design of the programs available at these institutions. The community college system in Canada, which

includes the Cégeps (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel/College of general and vocational education) system in Quebec, was created in the mid-1960s to address an anticipated need in the job market of the future for more technically skilled employees. Despite substantial changes in the job market in the intervening 50 years since they were founded, most community colleges still perceive themselves as institutes dedicated to technical training rather than academic education. As an associate dean of public relations at one large Ontario community college noted, students in their diploma or certificate programs are not interested in the academic study of public relations. "They want to learn how to "do" PR so they can get a good job" (Nichola, personal communication, May 2, 2011). Accordingly, the design of these programs is almost exclusively practice-oriented.

Many community college programs have advisory boards of senior practitioners that help them assess market needs and assist in the evaluation of programs, reflecting the practical inclination of the program designers. As already noted, few senior practitioners, who by dint of great experience qualify for these program advisory bodies, have any training themselves in theory and are unlikely to have experienced first-hand any value from the application of theory in a professional practice. They are not likely, therefore, to be champions for theory.

Currently, training for public-relations professionals creates entry-level practitioners who are skilled in the use of practical PR tools but who have minimal or no education in communication or PR theory. Yet, interviews with MA students who also are professional communicators, leaders in the professional community, and college and university educators, as well as an analysis of the relevant literature, suggest the need for a robust pedagogy of theory in

the professional communication classroom. Such a pedagogy of theory, guided by the themes of learnable intelligence, praxis and critical professionalism, may result in an improved professional education for communication professionals as well as more effective and strategic practitioners in actual practice.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine the impact of learning communication and public relations theory on the professional practice of public relations and to examine a directly related issue—the implications of this for public relations educators. Moreover, I will examine the potential in the community college system for developing a pedagogy of theory relevant to professional practice. Finally, I will briefly discuss the potential of theory in the development of the “critical professional” in professional communication.

## Chapter Two—Literature Review

In identifying the value of and place for communication theory in the professional education system for PR practitioners, it is worthwhile to do three things here at the beginning of this paper. Those are: (a) to examine the prevailing scholarly thought on the nature and value of communication theory; (b) to explore the link between theory and practice in professional communication and; (c) to look for a link between a robust understanding of communication theory and “learnable intelligence.” By learnable intelligence, I mean a reflexive ability to see, understand and respond in a nuanced and strategic manner to the underlying subtleties in professional challenges. A good starting point for the inquiry is to define theory.

Littlejohn and Foss (2008), in the venerable communication textbook, *Theories of Human Communication* suggest that definitions are very important because they establish a trajectory for discussion. The definitions of communication theory are as numerous as the scholars who have theorized communication, to name just those consulted for a definition of theory for this paper, these include: Adler, Rodman & Sevigny, 2011; Black, 2011; Chia & Synnott, 2009; Craig, 2005; Dainton and Zelle, 2005; Gordon, 2011; Griffin, 2010; Hanson-Horn & Neff, 2008; Ihlen, van Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009, and Littlejohn & Foss, 2008. Of these, from a professional communication perspective, Griffin and Black provide the most useful definitions. They articulate what a theory does as well as what it is, and their definitions touch the whole spectrum of professional communication activity at its best. Griffin (2010) defines communication theories as “careful, systematic and self-conscious discussion and analysis of communication phenomena” (p. 2). He suggests that theories act as “nets,” “lenses,” and “maps”

that corral connected ideas, enhance understanding of them, and as the term “maps” importantly implies, put the ideas into action. Griffin (2010) cites Burgoon saying “We have to ‘do theory’,” suggesting that theory that doesn’t lead to subsequent action is not complete.

Black’s lyrical definition of theory is:

Thinking made lucid and disciplined. Thinking concerned for the signal amid the noise—the pattern amid the chaos of human experience. Thinking that asks harder questions about the things we take for granted. Thinking that takes the background and brings it to the foreground. Thinking that sees reality as a series of problems to be solved rather than a social order that must be accepted on its own terms. (personal communication, October 22, 2010)

This definition is both broad and specific in its expectation of action that will be motivated by ideas. In its quest for thinking that sees reality as a series of problems that require resolution, Black flows from understanding (thinking) to action (resolution). This definition bridges theory and professional practice.

The question of the professional applicability of academic theory has been thoroughly examined by scholars, including communication scholars for whom communication and its professionalization are everywhere. Craig (2005) observed, for example, in his inaugural President’s Address to the International Communication Association, that we live in a communication-obsessed culture, so immersed in communication—media, advertising,

entertainment—that talking about talking has become commonplace both privately and in the public domain (pp.660-661).

There is abundant research on the connection between theory and professional communication practice, and it is deeply rooted. Indeed, communication was professionally practiced—and taught—in antiquity. McCroskey and Richmond (cited by Bryant, 2004) suggest that the oldest essay we have unearthed to date is a written lesson on rhetoric. The formal study of communication dates reliably at least to the Greek rhetors and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, published more than 2,300 years ago to provide useful scholarly rules—or theories—on effective spoken communication practices. Since its beginning scholarly theorizing has, to some extent, been pointed towards practice.

Frequently quoted in the literature on the theory-practice dynamic, Lewin (1951) famously, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 53). In a similar spirit, in her article “Teaching communication theory in the professional school,” Vocate cites Smith in arguing that the most important criterion for judging how good a theory is may be its usefulness (1997, p. 4). Indeed there is very broad consensus that a fundamental purpose for communication theory is to inform practice (Barge, 2004; Broom, 2006; Craig & Tracy, 2005; Neff, 2008; Petronio, 2006; Suskind and Suskind, 2008; Toth, 2006; Windhal, Signitzer and Olsen, 2009). Watts (2006) goes further, suggesting that scholarly experience in more established professions illustrates that theory is so fundamental to professional communication practice that any discussion that isn't grounded in theory becomes a matter of one person's opinion against another's (p.103).

If a broad consensus exists that professional communication practices such as public relations stand so clearly and directly to benefit from the fusion of theory and practice, it would be reasonable to assume that the profession embraces theory and that theorists embrace the profession. Yet, this appears not to be the case. In the tier of Canadian higher education that trains the majority of PR practitioners, the community college system, there is a deliberate distancing between theory and practice in the public relations diploma and post-graduate certificate programs. As one senior program co-ordinator, Karen, noted in an interview, the role of her program—its *raison d'être*—is to teach practical skills rather than theory (personal communication, April 28, 2011). A view is widely held among Karen's colleagues that theory has no central place in the professional public relations training programs at community colleges. What's more, a review of the prevailing literature indicates that the community college system in Canada is not unique as a site of some disharmony between professional communication theory and its practice.

Bryant (2004), in a presidential address to the International Communication Association, suggested that one of the fundamental divides in professional communication as a field is disharmony between the theoretical and the practical, what he called "basic versus applied" (p. 390). Suskind and Suskind (2006) claimed that some communication scholars are critical of the knowledge levels of professional practitioners. At the same time, they confirmed a view that is widely held among my practitioner-colleagues that ivory-tower intellectual quibbling among scholars conducting what Hoffman (2004) described as "toy experiments" (p. 215) is so remote from the actual experience of the professional that it is largely irrelevant.

Part of the problem may be that scholarly thought doesn't easily make its way from the academy to the field; there are not many established efforts to build bridges and to communicate between communication scholars and communication practitioners. For example, in the academic journals—a formative arena for academic discussion, debate and research—there may be little effort to bring practitioners into the discourse. In a study of all articles published in *Public Relations Review* between 2001 and 2003, Sallot et al found an overwhelming preponderance of articles —50.7 per cent—focused on theory of interest primarily to the academy. Just over 15 per cent of articles fell into the category of Practice/Application (Sallot et al., 2008). This weighting of published material away from practice towards academia may help illustrate the lack of respect some practitioners feel that encourages a rebound skepticism of those who “teach” among those who “do.” Indeed, it has been my personal experience in more than 15 years of public relations practice in the corporate, not-for-profit and government worlds that the school of hard knocks has been the academy for the vast majority of senior public relations practitioners.

A significant counterpoint to this resistance to theory among PR teachers and practitioners is Donna Vocate. Vocate (1997) is a strong advocate for the central importance of communication theory in practical schools—institutions teaching professional communication including journalism, public relations, film-making, advertising, mass media and marketing. Her article “Teaching communication theory in the professional school,” in which she interviewed a group of professional communication program heads at leading U.S. universities, states that the ideal environment for communication theory is the professional school (p.5). The senior

educators with whom she spoke linked theory to direct beneficial outcomes in professional communication practice. What's more, many saw an increase in critical thinking skills in their students; they developed what Vocate terms "learnable intelligence," thinking that is "conscious, innovative, analytical and reflects an understanding and a mastery of knowledge rather than the simple memorization of information" (p. 11). The idea of learnable intelligence, as opposed to neurological or experiential intelligence, is that people can learn advanced functional intelligence—they can be trained to think in ways that transcend ordinary awareness. They can be taught to see problems in 360 degrees so that every connection and context, including self-awareness, is evident in every issue. Learnable intelligence is critical thinking that is deeply grounded in theoretical training and understanding.

Vocate's 1997 study and the concept within it of learnable intelligence inspired this thesis. She made a direct link between studying theory and the development of learnable intelligence. That connection is important to the ongoing discussion on the links between theory and professional practice. This research attempts to add to the discussion by, among other things, asking a group of professional communication practitioners who have had a rigorous education in communication theory whether they actually did experience a considerable shift in their perception of the challenges and opportunities in their professional lives.

### Chapter Three—Method

I used a qualitative approach based on grounded theory to acquire the data for this thesis. Lucasey (2000) explains that qualitative researchers use open-ended interviewing that seeks to both explore and comprehend the attitudes, feelings and experiences of individuals or groups; that qualitative methodology includes focus groups, in-depth interviews and minigroups, all of which I used for this study. Cresswell and Miller (2000) note that “qualitative researchers use a lens not based on scores, instruments or research designs, but a lens established using the views of the people who conduct or participate...in the research” (p. 125).

Ethnography grew out of cultural anthropology and is a research method in which the researcher is immersed in the lived experience of those who are subjects—and thereby participants—in the research. Crang and Cook (2007) say ethnographic research instruments—interviewing, focus groups, and/or video/photography—allow researchers to “understand parts of the world more or less as they are experienced and understood in the everyday lives of those who live them out....” (p.1). Focus groups are interviews conducted with a small group of five to seven people, that enable researchers to go beyond harvesting just the views of individuals. Group dynamics and synergies can bring out richer discussion and thicker data than might be possible with the same individuals one-on-one. As Lawal (2009) noted, inductive, systematic questioning in focus groups can lead to high quality qualitative data (p. 54).

I used a grounded theory approach to understanding the data. That is, I began with data and sought to understand the meaning within the data rather than beginning with a preconceived idea or theory then seeking data to reinforce it. While grounded theory did not originate in

communication studies, it is well fitted to my research; grounded theory is the most popular research method used by qualitative researchers in the social sciences. While the methodology originated in sociology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), researchers outside of sociology have remodeled –adopted and adapted—the methodology to fit their own disciplinary knowledge generation (McCallin, n.d.).

Glaser and Strauss, the originators of grounded theory, believe that the adequacy of theory cannot be divorced from the process of making it. Rosen (1991) observed that ethnographers study others to find out more about themselves and others (p.2). I embarked on this research project to understand myself better as a professional communicator and as a public relations educator. I sought to understand the broader impact of communication theory on other practitioners and on the profession itself through the teaching of public relations and what the implications were for me personally and professionally.

As Crang and Cook (2007) note, in ethnographic research both the researcher and the researched are equally positioned, interconnected and involved (p.10). That is substantially, directly and literally true in the case of most of the research conducted for this thesis. Many of the students interviewed and I were part of the same 2009 cohort in the Master of Arts program in Professional Communication at a western Canadian university; many of the public relations faculty I interviewed are my colleagues in the public relations faculty at a large Greater Toronto Area community college; and I am a member of both the Canadian Public Relations Society and the International Association of Business Communicators, as are the association leaders I interviewed for my research. It is not enough, Crang and Cook claim, for researchers to identify

where their research participants are situated; they must also situate themselves (p. 13).

Consequently it was necessary for me to be mindful and vigilant to guard to the extent possible against permitting preconceptions about the interview participants or the interview subject matter to creep into the discussions.

I used focus groups where possible because that method was both convenient—I already had two groups of research participants gathered together in one place at one time—and because a focus group seemed likely able to generate the original data required to answer the research questions. I utilized a basic focus group approach recommended by Douglas, Windsor, and Wallin (2008), Ivanoff and Hultberg (2006), and Sharts-Hopko (2001). Sharts-Hopko (2001) recommends having a group facilitator, that is, a person skilled in drawing others into the conversation (p. 90). The role of such a moderator is to encourage conversation, not to interview participants (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006, p. 127); moreover, a moderator's sense of curiosity, enthusiasm for the discussion, and respect for the participants is essential. Crang and Cook (2007) say that a moderator should play a "curious but uninformed" role to encourage discussion (p. 99). I felt that my professional experience as a journalist, PR practitioner and teacher adequately equipped me to moderate these discussions. Douglas, Windsor, and Wollin (2008) recommend that the discussion be relatively unstructured but guided by leading questions (p. 160).

To capture interview data accurately I made audio recordings of all taped conversations either by means of audio recorder in focus groups and personal interviews or, in the case of remote interviews made by Skype or telephone, an off-the-shelf audio recording program called

*Audio Hijack Pro*. The focus group discussions and interviews with public relations association leaders were transcribed by a professional transcription service in Toronto. I transcribed the small-group interviews, teacher interviews, some association interviews and the Skype interviews. The email responses were digitally captured by my email program. All of the audio recordings and transcriptions were secured in keeping with the ethical research requirements of the university and community college involved in this research.

To extract meaningful information from the responses of the research participants for all of the research questions, I listened three times to all of the interviews and read the transcripts three times. I made a list of words that would likely be used in discussing the key concepts (see appendix C) and I colour-coded each word. Then, I marked phrases that included these words in the relevant colours in the transcripts. These are the participant responses presented in this thesis. For brevity, where appropriate, I deleted conversational punctuation—“um,” “er,” “like,” etc.

Guided by the themes of learnable intelligence, praxis and critical professionalism, my objective in gathering research data was to seek data in four areas of inquiry that offered potential insight into these guiding themes:

- 1: Does learning communication theory change practice for communication professionals who have formally studied the theory?
- 2: At the most practical level—at Canadian community colleges—is communication or public relations theory being taught to students in PR programs?

3: Do opportunities exist in public relations education to use a pedagogy of theory relevant to a professional training institution? Placing “praxis” or theoretically informed practice at the centre, such a pedagogy would teach communication and public relations theory in ways that encourages new practitioners to appreciate and use theory.

4: In the opinions of public relations educators and leaders in public relations professional associations, would public relations as a profession be enhanced by more teaching of communication theory in post-secondary public relations programs?

To gather data for the first area of interest—whether learning communication theory changes practice for communication professionals—I moderated two focus groups in November 2010. One was conducted with a group of 13 during a field research excursion with the 2009 cohort of the Master of Arts in Professional Communication with a specialization in Intercultural and International Communication program, of which I am a member. A second focus group was conducted with six students among the 2009 cohort of the same university’s Master of Arts in Professional Communication program. My focus group participants were selected because they had all studied communication theory in a course delivered in November 2009 at the same university in allied programs. As well, most of the students in the cohort are employed or self-identify as professional communicators, providing a deep level of similar, common experience. This level of commonality is important in assuring a useful and informative group discussion (Lucasey, 2009, p. 3).

I conducted four personal interviews with students at the university immediately before the focus group sessions were conducted. They were asked the same questions (see appendix B)

as the focus group participants, and their responses have been separately identified from the focus group responses. To access students in these programs who were not available for the focus group discussions, I subsequently invited these students by email to respond to the same questions posed to the focus group participants; two students responded and their responses have been separately identified from the focus group responses in this report. I subsequently spoke by telephone with another member of that cohort.

To gather data to answer the second and third areas of inquiry, that is whether theory is currently taught at Canadian community colleges, I examined the online course lists and course descriptions for 36 Canadian community colleges and universities offering public relations programs (See Appendix A). To determine whether a functional pedagogy exists for teaching theory in the most practical of professional communication schools I interviewed an Associate Dean, three department co-ordinators/lecturers, and one other veteran teacher at a large Canadian community college offering public relations certificate and diploma programs as well as a new baccalaureate degree in PR.

To examine the connection between theory and the idea of professionalism in professional communication practice, I spoke with five leading communication professionals who have been centrally involved through professional associations in setting standards for communication as a profession. To gather data for the first, third and fourth areas of inquiry I directly interviewed three communication professors at a large Canadian university.



### **Chapter Four—Does Theory Change Professional Practice?**

A gap exists in the literature on the connection between theory and praxis—that is the means and ways in which ideas are actively engaged in professional practice. While there is abundant literature on the professional value of linking theory to communication practice, including Vocate's (1997) observation that rigorous training in the theory creates learnable intelligence in practitioners (p. 11), there is little research that I could find that took the discussion to a next step: that asked appropriately educated communication professionals whether beneficial changes actually occurred in their professional practice as a result of learning communication theory. This research, within its limitations, attempted to help address the gap.

The students interviewed for this research were almost ideal candidates to help determine whether a rigorous education in communication theory develops learnable intelligence in communication professionals. All the participants were learners at the mid-way point in a two-year post-graduate degree program in professional communication with an appropriately heavy emphasis on communication theory. As well, they all self-identified as professional communicators. Had these interviewees been MA graduates with a few more years of experience in applying theory to practice I would have had a more mature view of the links between theory and learnable intelligence. However, the professionals participating in this research did have sufficient experience with theory to express preliminary opinions on links in their experience between theory and professional practice.

The sample size—about 25 per cent of the 2009 graduating class in two professional communication programs at a major Canadian university—gives me confidence that the opinions

are reflective of the entire class. At the same time, they practice professional communication in diverse fields—media, public relations, public affairs, government affairs, politics, film, and more—allowing me to assume that the profession has been fairly represented. As earlier noted, the majority of the student interviews were conducted face-to-face in focus groups and in one-to-one interviews. A few respondents were interviewed by email. All participants had been briefed in advance on the subject matter of the research—the links between communication theory and professional communication practice.

A small minority among the interviewees described themselves as very practical people and practitioners. Among these, the reaction to the general question of their individual experience of studying communication theory tended towards the mildly negative or neutral. For example, Marie, a communication consultant in northern Canada said, “I don’t use theory in practice at all. I take a very practical approach to meeting with my clients...who operate on a plain language level, so theory is of no value to them and I don’t use it” (personal communication, October 20, 2010).

Deliah, a veteran communication practitioner currently working in a not-for-profit organization, said that the theory didn’t seem to fit the actual practical requirements of doing her job on a project-by-project basis. “There are certain requirements that I am expected to fulfill for specific reasons, specific audiences. I don’t know that I would take theories and apply them today” (personal communication, October 20, 2010).

Sinclair, a ground-level aid worker in developing nations, was confident that there was no link between theory and the communicative aspects of his work. “The (theory) class was very

interesting in the moment and had pretty minimal impact on my real-life experiences, my practice. I have given little thought to the theories after the class” (personal communication, October 20, 2010).

Jasmine, a public sector communication professional, said learning theory gave her a base for further study of communication but professionally it was not relevant:

I don't think my daily practice of using communication tools has really changed that much. I still write communication plans, news releases, backgrounders, etc., in basically the same way as I have over the past 13 years as a communication professional. (personal communication, January 10, 2011)

At first blush there would seem to be little professional commonality in this group. However, all share one thing: they all are mid-career, mid-level practitioners working in fairly tactical communication environments; they have little opportunity in their workaday lives, at least as yet, to grapple with communication issues at a strategic level. For them, communication is a highly practical experience. Their experience is not dissimilar to my own professional experience. Up to the mid-level of my careers as both a journalist and then public relations practitioner, the day-to-day work was almost exclusively tactical in nature.

Yet, even in this group, most acknowledged that studying communication theory has been at the very least interesting and that they did see usefulness in theory at a level that was somewhat removed, at the moment, from their own professional activity. Deliah, for example,

was “intrigued” by theory (personal communication, October 20, 2010). Jasmine said, “I found learning the theories interesting but, *at the time* (emphasis mine) I didn’t see how it initially was relevant to my work” (personal communication, Jan. 10, 2011). Marie, the most definitive of the group in her suggestion that theory had no place in her work, acknowledged that theory does “enlighten a lot of people” (personal communication, October 20, 2010). Given their appreciation of the “enlightening” potential for communication theory it is possible—as these practitioners advance in their careers—that theory may emerge to find a somewhat more substantial place in their practice. Jasmine, for example, in discussions outside the interview, was energized by the theoretical elements of her studies and enjoyed the theory discussions in her classes, group work and assignments.

Black says communication practice that focuses solely on more effective use of professional tools will always be limited to the restricted horizon of the tactical; that to transcend the tactical requires a strong platform of communication theory (personal communication, May 8, 2011). His observation reflects the experience of a substantial majority of the participants in this research, that is, theoretical awareness operates at a level somewhat above the practical application of professional communication tools. Kiley, a television reporter, said she wasn’t sure that communication theory affected the product she put on the air. However, theory had been useful to her at a cognitive level—in understanding internal communication and organizational communication at her workplace (personal communication, October 23, 2010). Shabeen, another TV reporter had a similar experience:

I don’t think it’s changed how I do my job, how I report. But I think

understanding how different media affects models and different shows, certain types of media, affect people and populations...I can understand things in a more “meta” way. (personal communication, October 23, 2010)

Both of these practitioners operate day-to-day at very practical levels of journalism; they report on events assigned to them and they have little discretion in what gets reported. That notwithstanding, for Shabeen communication theory created a framework for larger possibilities. “When I look at an issue, when I look at story angles, I do see issues in different ways because I have a framework that I can say, ‘Oh, that’s why that happened’” (personal communication, October 23, 2010). Theory opened Shabeen’s mind, increasing her willingness and ability to look below the surface issues in what she reports in a way that suggests evolving journalistic learnable intelligence.

Among others in the focus groups and email interviews, the reaction to theory was very clear and significant. Belinda, a sergeant in a major metropolitan police force said her initial reaction was very negative. “‘Oh my God, theory!’ But I had kind of a light-bulb moment when I thought about how these theories would apply in police interviews and interrogations’” (personal communication, October 23, 2010). Arthur, a political campaign manager, said learning communication theory was a powerful experience for him because theory gave him a lens with which to consistently see through the obvious communication issues:

Normally you just kind of go by your gut...but every situation is different, so

being able to use theory not to define a situation but to be able to work with the

situation, I think it is enormously practical and useful. It's very powerful.

(personal communication, October 23, 2010)

Paul, a government communication practitioner, said theory led to a lot of deeper insights (personal communication, October 3, 2010). Melissa, a communication specialist with an advanced educational institute, said she finds herself analyzing people's behaviour using communication theory. For her, there is a "huge relation" between practical issues and theory that one doesn't exist in isolation from the other (personal communication, October 23, 2010).

In my own experience as a student of theory there was a defining moment—an "A-ha" experience—when I realized that communication theory wasn't just abstract, that it was connected to professional reality. That moment came when I first read gatekeeping theory. As a veteran journalist and a wire service editor (Canadian Press/Broadcast News, 1978-1988), I had worked for many years making gatekeeping decisions about what CP/BN clients received as part of their news packages which they, in turn, passed on to the public. Day to day, to me, this was just the job and I did not think beyond that. Exposure to media theory, particularly gatekeeping theory was literally shocking as I came to understand the immense reach of media gatekeepers and the impact they have on public issues and public discourse. As well, as a public relations practitioner, I spent a decade and a half learning by trial and error what "worked," with no idea that a robust body of PR theory existed that would have been very informative particularly as I reached strategic levels of practice.

In an effort to determine whether there was a defining or incisive moment for the interviewees in this research in the application of theory to practice, I asked if they had, as I had, experienced “A-ha” moments with communication theory. Many had. For example Barbara, a senior municipal politician, said she had an “A-ha” moment when she participated in an assembly of diverse stakeholders in an environmental initiative. The meeting rapidly degenerated into turf-wars and interest-protecting that she recognized from studying organizational communication theory. “You can connect the pieces about why you need the theory. That would be a defining moment for me” (personal communication, October 23, 2010).

Serena (personal communication, October 20, 2010), Adwoa (personal communication, October 20, 2010) and Nina (personal communication, October 20, 2010) all experienced “A-ha” moments with media theory—as professional and personal media consumers they discovered that their appreciation for media shifted fundamentally. For Nina, a professional actress, this was quite unsettling. “I have totally destroyed the...evening news...because we talked about the media theories, about the manipulation” (personal communication, October 20, 2010).

Langdon, a professional preacher, says his relationships with some of his parishioners have been affected by theory. “I’ve has a lot of ‘A-ha’ moments to the degree that I have reinterpreted the reactions to many of my messages because I preach every week” (personal communication, October 20 2010).

These interviews were crafted to determine whether professional communicators who had substantial education in communication theory were professionally changed by the experience. The research makes clear that no particular change resulted at the most practical level—how the

actual tools of professional communication are used. Writing a press release is still basic PR writing; media lists are still rudimentary undertakings. However, this research does show that the interviewees almost universally experienced a psychic shift in their practice, which is much more significant in the discussion of the impact of theory on practice.

For some participants theory caused a fundamental change. Kathleen reported that “I experienced...moments that fundamentally turned on its head the way I look at communicating. That will definitely change the way I look at communicating, the way I practice, the way I view the world” (personal communication, October 23 , 2010).

For Tina, studying communication theory was profound:

It totally made me make sense of the order of the world and the way things work and how communication transpires between people—what you should expect and how messages are transmitted. I found all of them applicable. For me the theory...was completely enlightening. (personal communication, October 23, 2010)

For Stella, “it allowed me to understand what I was doing and in other cases it opened up ideas of how I could do things better in the future” (personal communication, October 20, 2010). For Regis, a high school special education teacher, theory helped her understand how better to reach difficult learners and to pass her knowledge along to them to make them better communicators.

Thereza, an activist with at-risk women in developing countries, found that reasoned action theory and self-concept theory enabled her to narrow, refine and focus her practice at the most fundamental level. “I’m really excited about the theories, they are helping with my field work and that is a very, very powerful thing” (personal communication, October 20, 2010). For Wilamina, a veteran professional capital investment communication practitioner in the oil and gas sector, theory gave her tools to create underlying structure in sometimes-chaotic circumstances:

Communication is very dynamic...very individual. I have found in my praxis that I’ve actually applied it far more than I ever realized I did. It’s helped my structure and to build meaning in what might otherwise be somewhat chaotic. I am applying theory when I don’t realize it. I am applying it all the time. (personal communication, October 20, 2010)

A defining feature of this research is that the students who were interviewed, being largely new to theory, had only just begun to experience and reflect on how theory might transform their practice. In most cases at the time of the interviews, the transformation was still in its formative stages; these people were just mid-way in their graduate studies of communication theory and had had merely a year to migrate theory to their professional practices. That being said, there was a consistency of experience that a significant and fundamental shift was taking place, best said by Serena, who observed:

It’s made us more aware. We’re not a passive audience anymore and we are being critical and evaluating the media, each other, our communication with others. We’re

being critical, questioning and holding people to account. (personal communication, October 20, 2010)

The consistency of experience in changed attitudes and in some cases professional behaviour suggests the emergence of a more nuanced, sophisticated and strategic appreciation of communication challenges. It implies the emergence of learnable intelligence.

### **Chapter Five—Is Communication Theory Being Taught in Practical Programs?**

Given this project's interest in the value of theory to communication professionals and its place in their professional education, it's reasonable to ask whether theory is being taught in schools offering practical professional communication programs in Canada. For simplicity and because it is the area with which I am professionally connected, I will narrow this examination to a defined area of professional communication, public relations. In Canada there are few post-secondary schools which offer baccalaureate degrees in public relations: Mount St. Vincent in Halifax; Humber College in Toronto; Conestoga College in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario; and Mount Royal University in Calgary. Three universities offer master's degrees in PR or associated disciplines: Royal Roads in Victoria, Mount St. Vincent in Halifax, and McMaster's DeGroot School of Business. The overwhelming majority of people studying public relations in Canada are enrolled in either undergraduate PR diploma programs or post-graduate PR certificate programs at any of more than 36 community colleges offering these in Canada. In just a few cases a relatively small number of students are also studying PR at universities offering diploma or certificate PR programs.

At Humber College, for example, in 2011, about 250 students will complete either the Advanced Public Relations Diploma or Public Relations Certificate program. While Humber is among the largest providers of these practical professional PR programs, it is a safe guess that the number of diploma or certificate graduates emerging from the community college system will be considerably greater than the number of bachelor's of public relations graduates that will

emerge. Given that, it makes sense that providing communication and public relations theory in the diploma and certificate programs would have a significant impact on broadly developing learnable intelligence in the public relations field.

To determine if communication or public relations theory is currently being taught in diploma or certificate programs, I examined the course descriptions for 36 community colleges and universities teaching public relations on a list made available to me by the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) as well as other PR programs that I found online *via canadian-universities.net* (Appendix A). I discovered that the word “theory” is frequently used in the titles and course descriptions for a variety of courses in the few baccalaureate and master’s programs in public relations. Few of the community college or university diploma or certificate programs offered courses with the word “theory” in the title; however, more than a third of the programs offered courses described as “Introduction to Public Relations” or a variation on that title. A closer look at the course descriptions for these revealed that teaching of basic communication or public relations theory was included in the course. At Conestoga College, for example, Fran Gregory, Coordinator, Public Relations Diploma and Degree Programs, notes “Communication theory is embedded in our course called ‘Introduction to Public Relations’. You get students who just don’t even know what public relations is yet. So, it’s very rudimentary” (personal communication March 23, 2011). As well, many of the diploma and certificate programs included courses in organizational public relations, understanding media or social media. While no explicit mention was made of theory in either the course titles or

descriptions in these instances, such courses might reasonably provide an instructor the opportunity to work communication or public relations theory into the lectures and assignments.

To explore how theory might implicitly be being taught in these programs, I interviewed a group of diploma and certificate program co-ordinators and instructors at one large Greater Toronto Area community college. I wanted to determine if they were teaching communication or public relations theory as part of their lectures in those courses without a formal theory component in either the name or course descriptions. (One course at this school, an organizational communication course, does include the word “theory” in the course title.) Most of these instructors do make an effort to include theory in their course lectures because they see, as Lewin did, practical value in theory. However they face a challenge: the students in these programs, both undergraduate diploma and, in particular, post-graduate certificate programs appear to have little appetite for theory.

One student at this college, overheard in an anecdotal conversation at an industry event, said to a dinner table guest that her university education had taught her to “think” while college had taught her to “do” and she much preferred the latter. Vocate would find this view unsettling. “How,” she asks, “can you write a good news release if you don’t think it through?” (personal communication, May 8, 2011). But, one of that student’s instructors, Julia, said in an interview that she understands that sentiment. “The Certificate students almost resent theory coming into this program because they have four years of theory. They want practical... they just want to be able to do” (personal communication, April 18, 2011). Her experience in 30 years of teaching public relations diploma programs also is that these students—including transfer students from

university programs or baccalaureate grads—“...come to our three-year Diploma program because the theory wasn’t for them. They want to be technicians. They want to be practitioners” (personal communication, April 18, 2011).

Another instructor, Audra, said that students in, for example, her social media course come through the door with expectations that they will be getting a very practical course—no theory “People think they’re going to walk in and learn how to use Facebook and Twitter and all those other applications” (personal communication, April 3, 2011). Her colleague, Karen, who is the post-graduate Certificate program co-ordinator as well as being a lecturer at the college, said post-grad students have had enough theory in their baccalaureate programs. “They don’t want to learn more theory, even if you mention the word ‘theory’ they are going to be resistant to it” (personal communication, April 18, 2011). Students, she said, share the belief that the role of the community college is to provide technical and highly practical training rather than theory.

Program heads at other schools teaching public relations echoed these views. Amy Thurlow, Department Chair in Public Relations at Mount St. Vincent University, said in an interview that at the master’s level, the university’s students expect and welcome theory but in the undergraduate programs the students are focused very much on, “I need to know what I need to know to get a good job, so the motivation is somewhat different” (personal communication, March 24, 2011). Terry Flynn, Assistant Professor at McMaster’s DeGroote School of Business, related a discussion he had with a community college public relations class. “...98 per cent of them had undergrad degrees and I was going around the room and asking them, ‘Why are

you here?’ Because I am sick of theory and I wanted some skills I could get a job with” (personal communication, March 17, 2011).

Interestingly, despite the prevailing attitudes on the primacy of practical skills training that pervade faculty and the student body at this community college, Karen and the other instructors at this community college do consciously make an effort to bring theory into their teaching. Rather than doing so explicitly—from a theory text in a theory course—they teach theory implicitly: weaving communication and public relations theory into lectures, discussions, case studies, and assignments. Karen brings theory into her writing labs and presentations skills courses. “From day-one I talk about ‘What is it that you’re trying to achieve?’ So, even though I don’t specifically use the word theory I can definitely say that we’re all about the two-way model of communication” (personal communication, April 28, 2011). She uses the word “model” rather than “theory.” “Last week in writing I taught how to write a brochure and I used a specific model because the idea is that you have to do persuasive. So, really what I was teaching was a persuasive theory but I didn’t call it a theory” (personal communication, April 28, 2011).

Audra says “In order to understand how to do something, you have to understand the ‘why’—I have been weaving theory into social media in a variety of ways” (personal communication, March 16). She relates a discussion with a guest lecturer in her social media class—the digital communication manager for a very large corporation—who told her that the pace of change in technology made skills with particular social media applications secondary to a good understanding of why certain tools might be used in different situations. “What she needs

is people having more of a theoretical understanding of what the social media does rather than how it works” (personal communication, March 16).

Julia said “They need to understand leadership styles and how corporate cultures fit, especially if they intend to move into a management role” (personal communication, April 15, 2011). In a writing lab in which she was teaching students how to create a corporate brochure, Julia said she taught persuasion theories. “They are going to get theory in social media, they are going to get theory in both writing and presentation skills. Certainly in change management they need to understand theories” (personal communication, April 15, 2011).

James Grunig, a founding theorist in public relations, says whether it is overtly or subtly done, teaching theory is happening at the undergraduate level:

For young students, I think it is impossible to teach them without a theory, even if that theory is implicit in what is taught rather than explicit. As teachers, we have to ask what assumptions we are making about what techniques should be used and what effect they have. If teachers do that they are theorizing whether they think they are or not. (personal communication, July 9, 2011)

If the experience of the teachers at the community college where these interviews were conducted is in any way typical, some communication and public relations theory is being taught in Canada’s community colleges, albeit implicitly rather than explicitly. Yet, the fact that theory is being taught clearly indicates these teachers see value in going beyond the requirements of teaching the mechanics of the practical PR tools. They correctly perceive that there is an

important role for theory to play in practice: that any additional effort required to teach underlying theory will usefully enhance their students' understanding of why the tools work as well as how they work. In light of that it is useful to examine how teachers in very practical programs approach the challenge of bringing theory to life in practical ways. Is there pedagogy for making theory relevant to practice for these students who are, superficially at least, resistant to theory?

### **Chapter Six—Identifying Pedagogy Relevant to PR Practice**

In light of the findings of this research that theory is directly and substantially beneficial to professional practice, I believe that theory should be more widely taught in the public relations programs in Canada's community colleges. I also believe, based on direct personal experience as an instructor in the community college system, that students who may, on the surface, resist explicit theory courses in these practical schools, respond very well to learning that goes well beyond mere skills development.

I teach a course in communicating corporate finance that requires students to learn how corporate financial reports and statements are created, what they imply and signify, how corporate finance connects to the stock markets and the economy, how inflation and deflation affect markets and more. The practical toolkit for corporate financial reporting—the instruments the students will use to deliver the information—is well known to these students from other courses so the practical how-to's are barely mentioned; instead, the course focuses on the inner workings of communicating corporate finance issues. Students initially come through the door with little appetite for this course because it seems in the course description to be, as one student said, “business and stock market theory” for which there is little apparent need or value.

Yet, my experience has been that the students are quickly and deeply engaged by this course. This student and the hundreds of others I have taught this course discovered that seeing below the surface of corporate finance is exciting; they were able to understand what was previously impenetrable—the strategic aspects of corporate finance. They learn a new vocabulary—the language of finance and the economy—that they are able to bring to all of their

course work and for which they see great potential value in the careers. They learn to see through the superficial facts of finance-related matters to get to the important underlying issues, and they learn to respond more thoughtfully and meaningfully to the communication challenges they face as professionals who must communicate these issues. Learning rudimentary finance theory in this course leads directly to the development of the beginnings of learnable intelligence as far as corporate finance issues go. I have had dozens of emails from former students who go on to practice in the corporate world who tell me they use on a daily basis the knowledge and insights learned in this course; the theory-practice links they made in this course help them be better at their jobs. Reinforcing what my students discover with what they learn in this course, Anna Marie Willey, former Chair of the IABC Accreditation Council, noted that public relations practitioners, possessed of all the practical skills in the world, cannot help their organizations move forward unless they have a theoretical grasp of change management, strategic planning, business policy development, etc. (personal communication, March 28, 2011).

In fact, Toth and Aldoory (2010) observe that undergraduate programs are the ideal site for theoretical learning because these programs are designed to prepare the practitioners of the future. The need to think critically and strategically will require practitioners who are both tactically and strategically competent—who are comfortable with both action and theory (p. 13). The burden therefore falls on public relations educators to find ways—in the face of student resistance made evident by this research—to make theory meaningful and relevant. What is required to bring theory deliberately into the very practical programs is a pedagogical approach to theory that is relevant to practice—that actualizes theory and, in the words of Angus, an

instructor interviewed at a community college, “brings theory to life in the classroom” (personal communication, May 15, 2010).

For the finance course I teach, what brings the theory to life is hands-on team and individual projects that require them to use the theory in practical ways; they are required to create and manage a stock market “portfolio” and they work in teams to create annual reports for publicly traded “companies” that they have to create. These projects require them to put the rudimentary theory they have learned into action in the classroom. That is an important starting point for a pedagogy that is relevant to professional practice.

Good theory, Black says, while philosophical is also, importantly, experiential. Something actually happens at the existential level so that the student learning theory feels their world change and the earth move. “Theory, itself, is identified as a kind of ‘hyper-rational’ view of things. But it should have a phenomenological aspect to it. It should be sensitive to experience and how you make sense of experience” (personal communication, October 22, 2010)

Adler, Rodman, and Sévingy (2011) said “Our pedagogy should reflect our students’ needs, desires and dream. Students make it clear that good textbooks should spell out how theory and research relate to everyday life, convening with readers rather than talking down to them or over their heads” (p.xv). Like good texts, good teachers find ways to make theory come alive in the practical realm according to Terry Flynn:

If you come in and just talk down to kids, with, “Here are the 19 theories that you have to know,” it’s going to fall off them. But if you can inject the theories to support the

argument that you build it will have more resonance with the students. So, I think, you look at education theory from the same way. You ask, ‘How do you infuse theory into professional programs?’” (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

Vocate concurs. With her classes, “I have to give them practical examples and I have to talk about a particular theory in a way that gives them a practical base for it so they can see in the real world—from their perspective—how that’s going to make a difference” (personal communication, March 9, 2011).

From my discussions with educators in the field that they are in ample agreement: a pedagogy for teaching public relations needs to be practical, example-driven, and grounded in real world scenarios. Mount St. Vincent’s Amy Thurlow, for example, says such an approach would be much more palatable to students than dense theory courses during which “they glaze over, especially at the level of the community college” (personal communication, March 24, 2011). Conestoga’s Fran Gregory says, teaching theory in practical environments works when there’s a story with it, “a demonstration of why that’s important or why that works” (personal communication, March 23, 2011).

Teacher and three-year PR diploma program co-ordinator Julia—whose experience has been that community college post-graduate students can resent theory—explained her solution to the resistance. “I always try to put a practical component around it. So, I teach the theory and I will give them a PR situation where they have to apply that theory. I think it helps to set the context for them” (personal communication, April 15, 2011).

Angus believes that teaching theory to undergrad diploma students is problematic because they are younger, have less experience with university-level learning—and therefore theory. “They yearn be practical” (personal communication, May 15, 2011). If you don’t bring theory to life through practical example, Angus believes, the outcome will be negative. “So, to me the approach that makes sense is for me to add value in large part by connecting theory to actual practice through cases” (personal communication, May 15, 2011).

The connection between pedagogical approach and employment prospects is always present in community colleges. As Karen noted earlier, equipping students for quality employment is the role of community colleges. Chandra, a baccalaureate program co-ordinator in the community college system, draws a direct line between pedagogy in community colleges and the workplace:

I work extensively with senior practitioners in developing the program. To really succeed in today’s marketplace you need a balance between the tactical and the strategic and the theory gives you that in ways that not much else will. It gives you the framework so that you can examine the work that you do and the work that you plan from the point of view of those frameworks. (personal communication, March 15, 2011)

In creating a pedagogy that builds bridges between theory and practice the best approach is to link theory with practical outcomes. “If you can show them how it changes perspectives or how it gives them an overview that they didn’t have before or how it might make more effective getting this particular account ...you’ve got them” (D. Vocate, personal communication, March 9, 2011).

Supporting the educators' views, several of the master's students interviewed for chapter four in this research saw clear connections and great value in a pedagogical approach that brings theory to life in a way that's directly relevant to their practice. Stella said, "The University has to keep in mind that we are all practitioners. So there really has to be a conscious effort to bridge the theory with practice" (personal communication, October 20, 2010). Langdon agreed, "We're looking for explanations or tools that will help us achieve our goals" (personal communication, October 20, 2010). Janine said, "In order to teach theory more effectively, I think that a hands-on learning environment could have related the theory to everyday circumstances" (personal communication, October 23, 2010).

**Chapter Seven—Would PR Professionalism be Enhanced by Teaching Theory More Broadly?**

The final related question this research examines is what the broader impact might be if communication and public relations theory were much more widely taught in professional schools. Would there be a leavening effect on the profession of public relations if theory was vigorously taught in the educational system that is creating future generations of practitioners? Would communication professionalism be affected?

Professionalism is defined by the Oxford Online Dictionary as “The competence or skill expected of a professional” (Oxford, n.d.). There is a substantive discussion in scholarly literature on the links between public relations and professionalism. The discussion began in the 1980s but has persisted with many scholars contributing to the debate in the past decade, including, to name just a few, Brunnell (2004); Grunig and Grunig (2000, 2002, 2010); Gupta (2007); Kim and Reber (2009); Lages, Carmen, Simkin, and Lyndon (2003); Neimann-Stuweg and Meintjes (2008); Reese and Cohen (2000); Steiner (2001) and van Ruler (2005).

Grunig (2000) says one most commonly used method in research to identify professionalism is to identify the traits of the field. With this method, researchers develop a list of theoretical characteristics of a profession and apply it to an occupation such as public relations to determine the extent to which it has been “professionalized” (p.24). Grunig defines five core traits: (a) a set of professional values, (b) the existence of strong professional associations, (c) professional norms such as a code of ethics, (d) technical skills acquired through technical training, and (e) an established body of knowledge and an intellectual tradition (p. 26).

Those criteria or minor variations on them prevail across the literature on professionalism, suggesting that behaviour that adheres to those standards is broadly accepted as professionalism. Black defines professionalism more explicitly as the “efficient application of known tools and techniques within an environment defined in instrumental terms: one characterized by the rational pursuit of communication goals” (professional communication, May 8, 2011). In short, professionalism is a function of standards, values, ethics, and knowledge.

While it is true that standards and norms are essential guides for professional behaviour, there are important underlying aspects of professionalism. In contemplating professionalism in communication Black says:

The communication environment is one that touches on far larger issues that often escape the attention of professionals. Beneath the busy surface of communication plans and professional practice are deeper matters: truth, power, agency, meaning, identity. Every communication project, large and small, comes into contact with these deeper questions. Theory gives us the sensitivity to see these themes, the vocabulary with which to talk about them, and the intellectual power necessary to doing something about what we see and articulate. (personal communication, May 8, 2011)

Nolan (2008), like Black, says the concept of professionalism goes beyond what professionals do; rather it describes how they are. A more thoughtful approach to professionalism is to see it as an “occupational identity that functions as a mechanism of social control” (p. 740).

Black takes the concept of professionalism in communication a step further saying that the ideal for a communication professional is “critical professionalism.” Critical professionalism is a view of professional life that goes beyond the standard definition of professionalism to encourage self-conscious, conceptually-motivated and ethical approaches to method, message, audience, power, meaning, organizational context, and the wider culture (professional communication, May 8, 2011). Critical professionalism escapes the confines of the trait-based definitions to see and interpret what others do not. Communication professionals, he says, “owe their audiences the ability to do more than to repeat what is already known. They have a responsibility to be ahead of and lead their audiences, to teach them, to decode ideology, to expose cant, to reveal the world in its complexity” (personal communication, May 8, 2011).

Black maintains that critical professionalism is only made possible by virtue of communication professionals learning and using communication theory. “Theory offers a depth of understanding of tools, messages, organizations, audiences and the wider culture that is not available through ordinary forms of professional knowledge” (personal communication, May 8, 2011). It is worthy of note that Black’s definition of critical professionalism and how critical professionals behave is reminiscent of the definition earlier in this research of learnable intelligence. Vocate (1997) says that such intelligence also springs from theory, theory that “provides students with the opportunity to develop innovative mental strategies and an awareness of their own cognitive processing thereby increasing the students reflective intelligence exponentially” (p. 12).

Black's point about critical professionalism is that learning and using theory is more important for professional communicators and for the profession itself than might initially be evident; the importance of theory needs to be more widely contemplated and discussed. In that regard the interest of the profession may be better served by the education system in future.

In Canada, a national public relations association, the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), is proposing new educational approaches with a more explicit emphasis on the role of theory in public relations education at all levels. In the face of a more demanding public relations environment, the CPRS created a National Council on Public Relations Education (Education Council) to examine curricula in public relations education programs across the country. It also sought to consult business and leading public relations and private sector public relations practitioners across Canada to create recommended voluntary guidelines for curricula that would reflect current standards and best practices in public relations. In a report entitled, *Pathways To The Profession: An Outcomes Based Approach Towards Excellence In Canadian Public Relations And Communication Management Education*, the CPRS report offers a framework for public relations educators to compare programs, what Chandra describes as "a yardstick in assessing and comparing curricula" (personal communication, March 15, 2011).

In Section 1, "Setting the Context for Educational Standards," the report says "As a professional association CPRS has responsibility to play an active role in the development and maintenance of post-secondary education programs that reflect current theory, practice, professional values and relevancy" (p. 6). Fran Gregory, Coordinator of Conestoga's public

relations diploma and degree programs, is a member of the CPRS Education Council. On CPRS's role in offering guidelines she said:

Professional organizations do have a role to say what we think core knowledge is. This is one way of us getting a little closer to identifying core knowledge. And then, from there, we can start to build a more robust body of knowledge if we're all starting with the same kind of understandings and the same definition. (personal communication, March 23, 2011)

The report notes that graduates of Canada's PR programs are expected to be career-oriented and able to move into effective employment. In this pursuit, communication and public relations theory becomes important. "Meeting that goal," the report says, "will require a...sound understanding of current and relevant practices, principles and theory" (p. 13).

The report identifies distinct five pathways to the profession: (1) the Technical Pathway, (2) the Career Pathway, (3) the Management Pathway, (4) the Leadership Pathway, and (5) the Scholar Pathway, meant to reflect the educational programs that defines the pathways. The report establishes a course framework for each pathway that is constructed of : (a) Public Relations Theory and Practice, (b) Management and Theory and Practice, (c) Personal and Group Competencies, and (d) Applied Integrated Practice. Council Presiding Officer Colleen Killingsworth explains that the Technical Pathway is intended to apply to individuals taking basic certificate-level programs while the Career Pathway is geared towards people taking diploma programs (personal communication, March 8, 2011).

At even the most elemental level, the report's frameworks recommends explicit inclusion of PR theory courses and identifies anticipated professional outcomes that will arise from understanding theory. CPRS's hope, Killingsworth says, is that institutions will compare the *Pathways* document to their prevailing course frameworks. "Some of them are absolutely in line and some of them will be so far off they will never be in line" (personal communication, March 8, 2011).

CPRS stresses that the *Pathways* document is meant to offer guidelines to educators. However, Flynn, also a member of the CPRS Education Council, notes that the *Pathways* architects did consult widely in the creation of the frameworks. "We talked with the allied professions about this...all the other public relations groups in Canada that have a perspective on communication in a professional sense. So IABC, the Healthcare Communication Association of Canada, the Canadian Investor Relations Association" (personal communication, March 17, 2011).

At the time of this writing, *Pathways to the Profession* had not been formally rolled out to the public relations industry or to educators. If it fulfills its potential and becomes a widely-used platform for building education programs from the most elemental towards the most advanced, there is the possibility that communication and public relations theory might become more widely and more explicitly taught across the spectrum of public relations education. The result could be graduates with learnable intelligence who practice more critical professionalism—who will have "a higher level of awareness of trends and current events, be

more curious and mindfully aware of their environment...and have an understanding of how these link with one another” (*Pathways*, n.d. p. 9).

### **Chapter Eight—Discussion**

The hope of this research is to help illuminate a small corner of the debate on theory's relationship to practice, a discussion which scholars and practitioners in the communication field have conducted for more than 30 years. The inspiration for this research is a paper, "Teaching communication theory in the professional school" by scholar Donna Vocate (1997) who examined the question of whether theory was being taught to communication practitioners at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels in communication schools at U.S. universities. She hypothesized that a rigorous education in communication theory was essential in the creation of professional communication practitioners with what she described as learnable intelligence (p. 11). She found that communication theory was being taught at many of the leading schools of communication.

After reading Vocate's 1997 paper I searched for but could not find any following research among professional communicators who had studied communication theory to determine whether immersion in theory created learnable intelligence. Vocate said during an interview in 2011 for this research that she had not followed the initial research in 1997 with any subsequent research on the question nor was she aware of any other research that tested her hypothesis. Being ideally situated in a rich research site for this question—a MA program with 99 other professional communicators who had been immersed in communication theory—I attempted with this research to determine whether or not Vocate had been right that rigorous training in theory creates enhanced professionalism. I believe that my research begins to demonstrate that Vocate is correct.

More than a quarter of the students enrolled in an MA in Professional Communication, all of whom identify themselves as professional communicators, participated in this research that asked them, half-way through their two-year program, one year after studying the explicit theory course and with four more theory-heavy courses under their belts, to describe the impact on their practice of this rigorous exposure to communication theory. While most noted that their actual practical use of professional communication tools—communication instruments and processes—had not changed much, they acknowledged that how they think about communication had changed substantially. They had developed personal and professional philosophies of professional communication that operated at a conceptual level rather than at a practical level. Learnable intelligence began to emerge in these professionals. They were developing critical approaches that Black says will “. . . lead communication professionals into fresh, effective, and transformative communication" (personal communication, May 8, 2011). That being said, it would be useful to revisit these professional communicators after more time has elapsed to determine whether they have continued to expand their perceptions of communication as a profession and to determine how their practice has evolved as a result.

This research also examines issues related to the theory-practice connection. It asks: (a) whether theory is being taught in professional schools in Canada; (b) whether a pedagogy for theory that is relevant to practice might be easily identified for Canadian colleges and; finally, (c) what would the impact be on the communication profession itself if theory was brought to the centre of professional education? This is a state that Black describes as critical professionalism in communication work. (personal communication, May 8, 2011). These connections and

synergies between communication theory, professional education and professional practice are of particular interest to me. I am a professional communicator enrolled in a professional communication program of study, one that included rigorous teaching of communication theory, and I also am a teacher in a Canadian community college public relations faculty.

My own institution offered another ideal research location to explore how communication theory is actually being taught in professional communication programs, specifically public relations. The research shows that, while a few universities and colleges are teaching theory consistently throughout baccalaureate or post-graduate degree programs in public relations, the 36 community colleges in Canada—the sites for professional training for the overwhelming majority of future public relations practitioners—offer very few courses that include explicit communication or public relations theory. The community college system in Canada was created in the mid-1960s to stream students towards technical training to meet an anticipated explosion of technologically driven new industries. Fifty years later, it remains the view in the colleges that it is their role to provide students with highly practical skills rather than providing comprehensive theoretical frameworks; the latter are left to the university system to provide.

As well, this research reveals a belief among educators that community college students themselves hold a deep-seated antipathy to learning theory. Yet, interviews with teachers and teachers/administrators at a large community college reveal that they are teaching theory in a limited way; it is implicitly included in the delivery of intensely practical, skills-oriented courses.

While this research is sufficient to deduce that educators at a well-established community college with the largest PR program among community colleges in Canada, the interviews are restricted to just one institution which places a limitation on the broader reliability or applicability to the data. To help broaden the view as much as possible for this view of public relations programs at the community college level, I did examine in detail the course descriptions for the 36 community colleges offering PR diplomas and certificates and the four universities offering BAs in public relations, this is a limited way of gathering information. It would be instructive to widen the inquiry to ask educators at other community colleges if and how they teach communication and public relations theory in their practical programs.

Questions follow if—as this research begins to show—immersion in communication theory leads to enhanced professional practice. What approach might be taken to teaching professional communication theory to possibly reluctant public relations students? Is there a pedagogy of theory relevant to professional communication that will engage and energize these learners?

Interviews with teachers in the community college system, with senior educators in Canadian universities teaching public relations, and interviews with leading practitioners involved in setting professional standards for the communication professional associations in Canada suggest there is an appropriate pedagogy of praxis—pedagogy that would make theory directly and fundamentally relevant to professional communication. It must be grounded in professional practice, framed in real-world professional challenges and questions, and consistently be at the centre of the entire public relations curriculum. Relevant theory must be

woven into every practical discussion so that students learn *why* they are being taught to do *what* they are being taught to do. So that they are given skills, but also an essential “depth of understanding of tools, messages, organizations, audiences and the wider culture” (D. Black, personal communication, May 8, 2011).

Bringing theory to the centre of the educational system for public relations professionals is timely and important because the practice of public relations across the spectrum is in a state of great transformation. Communication technology, the pressures of globalization, reduced levels in public relations staffing across the board, and the entry into professional practice of more and better-educated junior practitioners, is quickly and permanently changing the professional landscape for public relations. In my own experience, in the past two decades—most particularly since the advent of the Internet—organizations of all stripes are expected to be in constant communication across many channels with increasingly complex and more diverse groups of stakeholders. In the face of these professional pressures, adequacy in the mechanics of communication is not enough; even at the junior level, PR practitioners are expected to be able to make analytical, pro-active decisions about message-making and to think strategically about the publics to whom they relate. This is particularly the case in online communication initiatives in which, in many cases, as I know from personal experience, entry-level practitioners know more than their bosses.

In its training of the new generations of PR practitioners the professional education system obviously understands the new pressures on young practitioners. Universities and colleges offering professional communication education are making adjustments in their

programs that take into account practical training in new technology and towards new market forces such as globalization or corporate social responsibility. These schools, however, appear to be missing an opportunity to take an important and worthwhile next-step—substantially bringing communication and PR theory into their program. That is unfortunate because, as this research shows, professional communication students benefit directly from robust training in communication theory.

At the classroom level many educators in the highly practical community college system believe in the value of theory to the extent that they go out of their way to teach theory in an implicit way. Unfortunately, their institutions do not see teaching theory in a meaningful, explicit, manner as being part of their educational mandate. As a result, most of the entry-level practitioners coming into the PR industry are very well trained in the use of professional tools but have little or no training in the underlying theory of professional communication. They are limited to understanding the “hows” of their new profession with little appreciation of the underlying “whys.” The system that trained them leaves learning communication theory to self or higher education.

Senior educators and practitioners interviewed for this research make a strong case that the current state of training in the community college system would benefit greatly from making a commitment to teaching communication theory. These industry leaders and standards-setters for the profession reiterate the connections made in the student interviews that there is a direct link between learning communication theory and subsequent enhanced professional practice. They also make the point that teaching theory in the community college environment is do-able

as well as desirable; they identify a pedagogy of praxis—grounded in theory made relevant to daily, real world professional experience—that could bring communication theory to life in the classroom.

Ultimately a commitment to rigorously bringing theory to the centre of professional communication education has the potential to make a significant contribution to enhancing the profession itself. While limited in its scope this research suggests that there is a connection between a rigorous training in theory—resulting in learnable intelligence—and a shift towards critical professionalism—subtle, insightful, strategic professional communication practice that sees beyond and through the immediate challenges inherent in a professional exercise to see the connections, the values and the greater professional opportunities.

At both the student and the institutional level, the issues of learnable intelligence and critical professionalism are worth further examining. I do not know one student in my public relations classes, nor do I know one colleague in the PR faculty in which I teach, who would not agree that deeper professional insight and superior professional practice are worthy goals for any practitioner.

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**Appendix A—Canadian community colleges and universities offering PR or PR-related programs**

1. Algonquin College of Applied Arts & Technology
2. Athabasca University
3. British Columbia Institute of Technology
4. Cambrian College
5. Camosun College
6. Centennial College
7. Conestoga College
8. DeGroote School of Business, McMaster University
9. Fanshawe College
10. Grant McEwan College
11. Humber College of Applied Arts and Technology
12. Institut économique de Montréal
13. Kwantlen University College
14. Langara College
15. Lethbridge College
16. Loyalist College
17. McGill University
18. Mohawk College

19. Mount Royal University
20. Mount Saint Vincent University
21. Niagara College
22. Nova Scotia Community College
23. Red River College
24. Royal Roads University
25. Ryerson University
26. St. Lawrence College
27. Seneca College
28. Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning
29. UQAM
30. University of Calgary
31. University of Guelph-Humber
32. Université Laval
33. University of New Brunswick
34. University of Regina

35. University of Victoria

36. University of Western Ontario

**Appendix B - Key words in focus group text analysis**

Theory      Theoretical

Using      Applied      Apply      Applying      Application

Class      Teach      Teaching      Teacher

Relevant

Context

Understand

Ideas      Concepts

Future

Practice      Praxis      Practical

Communication      Communication      Communicator

Professional      Profession      Professionalism

Tools

Learnable intelligence

### **Appendix C—Focus group interview questions**

The questions were:

Q1: What was your personal experience of PCOM 510—of learning communication theory?

Q2: Has your practice of communication tools—the day-to-day practical; methodology—changed as a result of your understanding of the theory underlying communication?

Q3: Have you had “A-ha” moments with communication theory—mind-shift moments?

Q4: In my own experience my fundamental understanding of what is communication has been altered by learning theory. I wonder if you have had the same experience or a different experience of changes in your underlying, core, understanding of professional communication.

Q5: Donna Vocate said in her paper that studying communication theory improves a practitioners "learnable intelligence"—the ability to grow intellectually and critically. How do you respond to that idea?

Q6: Based on your experience learning theory are there opportunities for teachers to teach communication theory more effectively?