Communication Pedagogy for the Real World

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Abstract

In the United States, a gap exists between what is taught in university journalism and mass communication courses and what journalists and media managers expect. The media professionals and academics often debate over whether communication programs should be more theoretical or practical, general or specialized, rigid or flexible. Over the years, great efforts have been made to improve the dialogue between these two important sectors of the field. In Taiwan, there is also a long-standing disagreement about what should be included in the communication courses within the academies. This article addressed several approaches (e.g., internships, experiential learning, and closer collaboration with media professionals) that Taiwan academic communities might learn from their American counterparts in making connections between theory and practice.

Keywords: communication education, communication pedagogy, internship, experiential learning
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Introduction

In the United States, a gap exists between what is taught in university journalism and mass communication courses and what journalists and media managers expect. The media professionals and academics often debate over whether communication programs should be more theoretical or practical, general or specialized, rigid or flexible. Academics and practitioners of journalism and mass communication have always had a different focus. The practitioners feel that colleges and universities do not offer enough hands-on experience and fail to cater to the needs of the news and media industry. Although most academics seem to agree that some degree of technical training is necessary in the program, conflicting views exist as to how much practical training should be incorporated into classroom curriculum. Over the years, great efforts have been made to improve the dialogue between these two important sectors of the field.

For the same reason, there is also a long-standing disagreement about what should be included in the communication courses within Taiwan’s academies. Discussions between media professionals and media educators continue to debate the values of practical skills versus a theoretical-liberal arts education. However, experienced communication educators agree that the communication field is dynamic and ever-changing. The educational missions are now being examined and redefined together with methods to keep up with evolving technologies, the needs of media industry outlets, and globalization. To some extent, an integration of practical skills with theoretical communication concepts should be considered.
There is immediate work needed to close the gaps and to meet challenges such as digital media technology and the growing voice of employers concerning communication competence and the competition of globalization. This article opens up a discussion by addressing several approaches that Taiwan’s academic communities might learn from their American counterparts in making connections between theory and practice.

**The Trends of Journalism and Mass Communication Studies in Taiwan**

In the six decades since journalism and mass communication studies were introduced in Taiwan, Taiwanese universities have developed comprehensive undergraduate and graduate level programs with a solid research component. According to Wang (2006), political democratization, economic prosperity, educational progress, and mass media modernization have contributed to a well-developed journalism and communication education in Taiwan. In particular, the Taiwan media industry has made great progress in the last two decades, providing a good basis for future growth. In 1987, the government lifted martial law, creating a huge social change. In 1988, restrictions on a number of newspapers ended. Then the deregulation of broadcasting policy was allowed to introduce private cable and satellite TV enterprises. They subsequently granted new licenses for AM and FM radios, as well as cable, terrestrial and satellite television. These fundamental changes led to a new era in communication industry.

This rapid expansion of the communications industry through mass media, internet and telecommunication has led to the need for training programs in the marketplace which have steadily increased over the several years. In 1955, Taiwan had only one graduate and two undergraduate journalism programs but by 1986, there were eight universities and colleges
with three graduate institutes and twenty-two undergraduate departments. Currently, there are thirty one Taiwanese universities that provide journalism and communication programs. This makes communication studies such as journalism, advertising, public relations, broadcasting (radio/ television) and film production as a major force in the Taiwanese higher education landscape. These departmental programs also provide general courses and major in speech communication, communication management and telecommunication. Courses in new media studies are growing significantly. Furthermore, more and more Taiwanese students return home from studying abroad and they bring new ideas with them. To date, most of them hold key academic and media industry positions. Since many instructors are educated in the United States, the Taiwanese communication curricula and course structures are often based on American models.

Presently, the major objectives of the Taiwanese undergraduate curricula are to meet the needs of the media industry. They offer courses in journalism and communication research, and provide training for careers in newspapers, magazines, radio/television/film, advertising, public relations and other allied fields. In a fundamental way, first and second year students are given a comprehensive understanding of the basic concepts and perspectives in journalism and mass communication. In their third and fourth year, students concentrate on their majors. The undergraduate programs offer both the core and elective concentration courses. The minimum requirement for undergraduate graduation ranges from 128 to 148 credit hours. To enhance the major and increase skill levels, each department offers a number of minor programs which usually takes an extra twenty to thirty credit hours to complete it. As the number of students and returning adults wish to complete Master’s degrees in
journalism and mass communications increases, educators are responding with new curricula at the graduate level. The Master program is designed for those who are planning to have a career in the communication industry while Ph. D. program is tailored to help prepare students who want to do research and teach in the expanding departments of communication at major universities.

**Bridging the Gap between the Academia and Practice**

Durham (1992) contends that teachers and students have often gone in two different directions. Students expect to be taught practical information, while faculty approach the curriculum from a research-driven perspective. Durham further indicates that both directions should be taught in the classroom. Moreover, Durham provides an example of a news-editorial classroom focused on management, in which students raise questions about interdepartmental interaction in journalism and mass communication related industry settings. Basically, instructors with technical backgrounds generally lean toward a skills-based program while those with theory-based backgrounds lean toward conceptual learning. Medsger (1996) found that more and more journalism educators were being hired based on their doctoral degree (research degree), rather than their journalism experience. She then questioned which is more important, the degree, or the experience? In her study, of new journalists, 57% said that their best journalism instructor had extensive professional journalistic experience and no doctoral degree.

Duhe and Zukowski (1997) conducted a survey of 60 academics and 260 television news directors. The authors intended to find out what types of programs colleges required students to go through in broadcast journalism, discover what educators and industry
professionals thought was the most appropriate curriculum balance, and determine which curriculum would help students succeed in the broadcast news industry. The results indicated that a majority of TV news directors and academics agreed that the capstone semester, which included the most television laboratory experience, was the best type of curriculum to prepare successful broadcast journalists. The study revealed that both hands-on applications and liberal arts studies were crucial for the well-rounded broadcast journalism education.

The Curriculum Task Force of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) examined journalism and mass communication programs and analyzed articles dating back to 1982. They reported that media education needed to teach practical as well as “philosophical” concepts in skill oriented courses (AEJMC, 1996). In this view, Dickson and Sellmeyer’s study (1992) showed that many American college journalism and mass communication programs were evolving to include both theoretical and practical issues in all forms of media in a single program. They surveyed 380 journalism and mass communication programs and determined that “the trend toward a holistic curriculum is gathering momentum” (p.35). Van Maanen (2006) has also suggested that success in academic programs may not be a good predictor of success in the real world. Graduates of media and journalism schools often enter the work force unprepared for the competencies and experiences needed to apply the academic theories learned in a classroom setting to real-life situations. Business ethics and listening skills are perceived by employers to be major factors in determining the success of college graduates in the work environment.

Bales (1992) acknowledges the ongoing debate between educators and professionals in the field of journalism and mass communication, and has made the following
recommendations for improving relations between news professionals and educators: productive internship programs, guest lecture series, and workshops for professionals and educators to exchange ideas. Several of these approaches found in literature provide useful insight for Taiwanese communication educators to build bridges between the academies and the practitioners.

**Internships**

Internships add an important dimension to journalism and mass communication and have become a necessity for students making the transition from college to career. Internships take many different forms (Blake, 1987). For example, journalism internships might include full-time professional news work for three months over the summer break. They may be part-time work 10 to 20 hours for one semester, rotating internships over several news departments, paid internships and credit internships, pre-professional and professional internships. The work may involve reporting, editing, photography, research and clerical work.

Internship experience could help students learn skills and find jobs, and could benefit journalism programs by providing contacts with the professional community. A study of journalism students at three U.S. Midwestern universities indicated that about 51% of the news editorial students and 57% of the advertising students said having an internship was essential in preparing them for jobs (Becker, Fruit, & Caudill, 1987). Public relations students, about 93%, valued the internship more than did other categories of students. In a nutshell, students learn from internships. In a case-study during a six-year period, Riley (1983) reported that students learn about deadlines, the impact of inaccuracies, the value of trust by
sources, the need for multiple sources in a controversy; techniques for writing about uninteresting subjects; the need for seriousness of purpose; how to take the initiative, how to get along with co-workers, how to talk on the telephone and how to deal with complexities and subtleties of interaction.

The role of internships in journalism and mass communication education is well established since most journalism and communication faculty have little doubt about the worth of internships in helping students prepare for jobs. An internship may not guarantee jobs, but does offer insurance. Davis, Steen and Rubin (1987) pointed out that few internships guarantee student success in a chosen field, but that practical experiences are sound insurance policies. In their study, respondents reported that the internship encouraged them to continue their career goals; clarified the relationship between classroom work and real work; helped them to understand themselves better, their interests and their goals; and helped them find jobs.

Along with finding jobs and learning professional skills, internships offer other benefits related to job success. Blake (1987) indicated that internships: 1) give a person a chance to see what a chosen profession will be like day-in and day-out, 2) provide experience in a chosen field before graduation, 3) offer a solid portfolio of published work that can be shown to potential employers, 4) help a person learn how to organize time and manage projects, 5) match a person with a number of present and potential mentors, 6) develop strong work habits and daily discipline in meeting deadlines, 7) connect a person with editors and colleagues who may choose to use their first-hand knowledge of a person and their contacts in the industry to help a person find a full-time job at graduation, and 8) connect a person
with a permanent position. Furthermore, students also get an opportunity to experience role socialization, become sensitized to ethical concerns, increase their public service commitment, and develop a sense of efficacy (Gryski, Johnson, & O’Toole, 1992).

For years, most of the Taiwanese colleges have offered internship course which has been implemented as part of the curriculum whereby students must intern in media industry. The benefits of internship are seen by them as potentially valuable. According to an undergraduate internship survey done by Chaoyang University of Technology in 2009, approximately 97% of its communication students reveal that completing internship is helpful (Chaoyang University Internship Survey, 2009). Moreover, 90% of students agree that internship stimulates them new interest in academic course work and 82% of them point out that interning helps them learn career-related skills and develops their career paths. Overall, students admit that they have the opportunity to broaden their horizon (99%) and apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to actual hands-on professional experiences (91%). Given the above, the communication department needs to implement of a feedback mechanism which regularly seek feedback from student interns and their on-site supervisors to ensure the quality of students’ learning experience through internships.

**Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning has been defined as a process during which a person experiences an event, acquires competencies, and then compares the knowledge gained with knowledge gained in similar situations (Kolb, 1984). More precisely, a person may observe an event, integrate this into theories, and derive hypotheses that are tested in action, creating new events and experiences. Today, students not only study on campus, but experiential learning
is a trend in journalism and mass communication. According to Katula and Threnhauser (1999), experiential learning included non-traditional educational experiences such as study abroad programs, cooperative education and service-learning which have been developed to give students a well-rounded education.

There is little empirical evidence that suggests study abroad programs help students in communication studies with conceptual understanding but reflection and new perspectives might be the best things acquired through study abroad programs. As a general guide, a cooperation education (commonly known as co-op) provides a combination of classroom-based education with practical work experience. Williams (1993) stated that cooperative education helped with learning in communication curriculum in general since students had the chance to work hands-on in job situations in most cases. Williams further pointed that two positive outcomes resulted from the cooperative education experience: 1) co-op students displayed more practical job knowledge than non-co-op students, and 2) co-op students displayed more general “tacit knowledge” than non-co-op students.

Service learning is a pedagogy that combines classroom instruction with community service. It is increasing in popularity among universities in the United States. Its goals are to provide students with experience that will reinforce the curriculum and connect students to the needs of the community. Weigert (1998) suggested that service learning “offers a vehicle to faculty, students, and community partners for thinking and responding in new, collaborative ways to the critical issues that confront our local and global worlds” (p. 9). More specifically, service learning is meant to provide students with an opportunity to use the skills and knowledge that they acquire. This pedagogy includes activities that are assessed
and factored into their grade. The key to service learning is reciprocity (Rhoads, 1998). In essence, the communities benefit from the service projects and the students’ services help them to become engaged in civic activity and gain a deeper understanding of course content.

Service learning in communication programs has been found to help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. For example, Corbett and Kendall (1999) revealed that 75% of students reported that the service helped them understand the basic concepts and theories of the subject and 70% reported that the service learning class helped them become more aware of community problems. Of those students who noted community awareness, 56% indicated they were more interested in solving those problems. Sellnow and Oster (1997) explored the use of service learning in the communication discipline, and showed students participating in service learning opportunities engaged in orientation and training, meaningful service, as well as structured reflection. In their findings, the respondents indicated that a service learning experience was equivalent to a traditional internship in terms of student learning potential. In a follow up study to the previous findings, they reported that service learning counted for academic credit in the majority of surveyed communication departments (Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, & Pearson, 2004). However, the study noted an alarming decrease in meaningful service experiences and a lack of structured reflection. The researchers thus emphasized the importance of providing students with a strong orientation to service learning, meaningful experiences, and carefully structured reflection.

Panici and Lasky (2002) explored the relationship between service learning and journalism and mass communication programs in colleges and universities. The results of the
survey indicated that service learning is beginning to become a vital part of the journalism/mass communication curriculum. Additionally, they pointed out that public relations and media production classes lead the types of courses that readily identify service learning as a valuable addition to course content. Perhaps, these two areas embody more evidence of service learning applications because the course subject matter lends itself to direct needs that community organizations value (e.g., public relation materials such as newsletters, pamphlets; promotional video/audio materials; web site designs). In other words, it seems that service learning is more applicable to class experience and outreach needs in public relations and media production courses than other courses. In a recent study, Flournoy (2007) examined four classes of college students involved in service learning projects. The study showed that the projects provided students with the skills required for investigative reporting, increased their motivation to study, and enhanced their desire to make a positive difference in their community. The projects also prompted two foundations to award US$150,000 in grant money to support similar work in the future.

Service learning is primarily an American learning concept but it can also work across cultures. Stevens (2001) described an endeavor in cross-cultural service learning within an organizational communication course at an American university that also included four students at a Russian university. The students in Russia undertook their service learning project in their local community and participated online in the American course. The results stated that students on both continents studied in English, learned communication principles and applied their knowledge to helping a social service agency.

To date, the approach and pedagogical techniques of service learning is not very popular
in communication departments in Taiwan. Taiwanese communication faculty has been slow to incorporate service learning into their coursework. As noted earlier, service learning is particularly relevant to journalism and mass communication courses. For example, the Taiwanese public relations faculty can implement service learning projects in their class rooms, ranging from public relations community campaign experience to a student commitment to a non-profit organization during a semester. Often, students are able to apply classroom learning in a real-life setting and gain insight into the public relation field. An old Chinese proverb expressed this idea with “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.” This learning by doing is the basis for an increased understanding of course concepts (Isaacson & Saperstein, 2005). One key element of service learning that sets it apart from internships is the requirement of reflection. Commonly used methods of reflection include journals, writing assignments, and group discussions. Clearly, service learning provides benefits for students that traditional courses cannot by promoting enriched and enhanced learning (Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000). As such, it is necessary to increase Taiwanese students’ exposure to the value of service learning in communication education.

**Closer Collaboration with Media Professionals**

Most of the top executives felt that there needed to be a stronger link between universities and media industry. Media professionals recommended that universities should grant leaves to faculty to work in the broadcasting and cable industries (AEJMC, 1989). Another recommendation involved the creation of partnerships between journalism programs and news organizations (Medsger, 1996). The partnerships could include having staff
members serve on advisory committees, connecting staffers with students, providing monetary assistance, and collaborating on journalism projects with journalism professors and students. These recommendations were that both sides need to work together, but little was revealed on how to make the connection. Haldane (1997) confirmed that one way to bridge the gap and facilitate cooperation is through the creation of professional advisory committees. Professional journalists are provided an opportunity to support and advise a journalism or mass communication program through their involvement with an advisory committee. This link offers a forum for both educators and professionals to discuss and strengthen the educational process in journalism and mass communication programs.

Due to limited resources, specialized courses or a desire to make linkage with practitioners, Blanchard and Christ (1993) proposed that adjunct professors and guest lecturers are another bridge-building strategy. Many media practitioners see the academy’s hiring of adjunct professors as a way of making the academy more rigorous. Most of them are happy to come to classes and discuss their profession with students. Admittedly, Hansen (2005) indicated that media organizations allow and in some cases encourage their staff members to take adjunct teaching positions in local journalism and mass communication programs as a way of keeping in touch with the next generation of practitioners. Media professionals can also devote time to making guest lecturers or speaking appearances for student and faculty audiences. On the other hand, journalism and mass communication school alumni might serve as mentors and internship supervisors for students seeking workplace experience to accompany their classroom learning. All of these interactions and connections provide opportunities for journalism educators and media professionals to bridge some of
their longstanding differences.

**Challenges Ahead**

Willnat and Weaver (2006) pointed out three new main challenges on journalism and mass communication can be identified in the United States and abroad: 1) journalism and mass communication programs have been slow to adapt to the rapid changes in media technologies, 2) a growing percentage of students graduating from journalism and mass communication programs no longer find traditional media jobs in print, broadcasting, public relations, or advertising, 3) how journalism is taught is related to the growing globalization and multiculturalism that characterize many societies around the world. By the same token, these challenges are faced by Taiwan’s communication programs as well. Technological advances and the new media landscape are having a great deal of impact on journalism and mass communication education. Convergence and new technologies are causing anxiety for educators, making them rethink what and how they teach, and asking why and for whom they are teaching. Without a doubt technological changes have and will continue to influence educators to be more flexible and creative in their approach to traditional course offerings. Although in the United States many universities now offer online journalism courses, there seems to be little agreement about how and what exactly distinguishes online journalism from the more traditional journalism practices in print and broadcast media (Willnat & Weaver, 2006).

In fact, both the media industry and educational institutions at all levels are struggling to understand and keep up with the technological changes that are challenging every assumption they have had for years. During the past decade, most schools have been forced to
contemplate the issue of convergence and new technologies. A survey found that between 1998 and 2002, about 60 percent of the schools in the United States redesigned their curricula or developed new courses to prepare students for practicing news in multiple media platforms (Huang, Davison, Davis, Nair, Shreve, & Bettendorf, 2003). The findings also revealed that the majority of respondents agreed that journalism students should learn how to write for multiple media platforms, and that they need to learn to cooperate and collaborate across newsrooms so as to bridge different newsroom cultures. One issue that arises is that, using advanced computer technology in media education with advanced digital equipment is extremely expensive. Most of the departments might have problems with funding that limit their ability to expand educational capabilities.

In Taiwan, the emergent evolution and development of the telecommunication and the internet, and the demand for technical training to produce digital content is growing dramatically. Thus, the number of technical courses on computer graphics, animation and internet content production and digital broadcasting programs are increasing in many Taiwanese universities. The increase in the number of courses in telecommunications, and digital media communication reflects the rapid development of communication technologies. Hence, communication programs need to take steps in response to new media and begin revamping their courses to incorporate into their curricula.

Moreover, today’s journalism and mass communication graduates increasingly move into other communication fields, such as corporate public relations and marketing or government communication. According to Willnat and Weaver (2006), this trend has led many media education programs in the United States to teach more general communication
skills not exclusively linked to specific news media. Chung, Tsang and Chen (1996) also argued that the field of communication in Taiwan has over emphasized the so-called declarative knowledge about “what to do” and fail to provide enough information on “how to do.” Students should be given opportunities to learn how to observe, organize, perform and search for information besides having basic theoretical knowledge. Many educators believe that academic endeavor should return to its pluralistic nature of social sciences and humanities with media studies as a sub-division. The aim of university education is to provide a more rounded education for the whole person rather than a mere vocational training.

In respond to this pedagogical approach, most programs now claim to offer a curriculum that provides strong training in basic technical skills balanced with course work focusing on theories and concepts. There is also a strong emphasis on liberal arts, humanities and social sciences.

In recent years, the issue of globalization has come into focus, generating considerable interest in communication curricula. For example, as American corporations accelerate the transnational nature of global business, they simultaneously increase their need for creating uniform public relations campaigns and marketing policies on a worldwide scale. However, past research shows that public relations programs around the country are deficient when it comes to regularly offering courses or building perspectives that are international, global and multicultural in nature (Culbertson & Chen, 1996). Bardhan (2003) indicated that students are far from apathetic about multicultural and international learning. In a broader context, the students emphasize that a vital pedagogical connection is missing, and that the international multicultural relevance of public relations needs to be made more “real” for them. They feel
that the current public relations curriculum does not help enhance a sense of global and cultural connectedness.

Consequently, in respond to the rapid pace of globalization and new global trends, many Taiwanese communication programs emphasize English language skills and are increasing foreign exchange programs to broaden their international scope. It is helpful to go global by collaborating with reputed foreign universities; to ensure international educational opportunities for Taiwanese communication students. The nature of collaboration with foreign universities has many forms. One common collaborative approach is having foreign faculty members stay for a period with Taiwanese faculty to help develop courses and research projects. As such, students could learn different media systems and new media technology could be developed through international collaborations. The ultimate goal is to keep students achieve success in the real media industry world and provide cutting-edge knowledge and hands-on experiences.

Although Taiwan adopts the American education system in many ways, there are still some different characteristics in developing its own communication programs. No matter what debate between the academic and practice, it is important that Taiwanese journalism and mass communication scholars consider the challenges that are occurring in the profession in order to keep abreast of the changes and avoid becoming possibly outdated. As noted earlier, the benefits of internship can open up many doors for students. The department should obtain more feedback on a regular basis from students and on-site supervisors in order to keep the quality of the internship and enhance its advantages for both students and their internship site. Meanwhile, it is necessary to promote the need for closer connections between academia and
the industry. Wang (2006) indicated that Taiwanese communication academic communities lack sufficient cooperation with practitioner arenas. He further suggested that the academic need keep closer ties with practitioners, especially from those located in the central and southern part of Taiwan where few media companies are in operation. In fact, the collaborations between the academy and the professions can benefit both (Hansen, 2005). Professionals take advantage of the latest research that communication educators can offer. Relatively, communication program can maintain an up-to-date connection with professionals and a challenge perspective the media industries face.
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