How Strategic Communication Shapes Value and Innovation in Society - Advances in Public Relations and Communication Management

Lessons learned: Communication Studies in transition

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Abstract

Jobs of communication professionals are closely linked to transformations in society and therefore the role of these professionals is changing rapidly. Communication students must be prepared for the new demands put on communication professionals in the field. In Ede, a new curriculum in communication was launched in order to enable students to become relevant partners in dialogue with society. Not only has the content of the curriculum changed, but also the organizational structure of our faculty and the educational role of the lecturers.

We can identify three areas in the new curriculum where fundamental transitions have been made, in order to meet the expectations of a profession in transition:

1. *Decentralization.* In order to create an agile educational environment, we choose flatter structures and more autonomy for development teams (including budgets). Creating educational ownership improved knowledge sharing and idea generation among lecturers.

2. *An agile curriculum.* We renewed the content of the curriculum and added subjects as online reputation management, web care, training skills and advanced listening. What's more: from now on we invest to improve the curriculum every year, in cooperation with stakeholders. Students participate in focus groups about the curriculum and partners in the field are invited as co-creators.

3. *The role of lecturers.* The ongoing development of the profession has huge implications for the role of the teaching staff. The lecturer used to be the expert. He shared his knowledge with the newcomers, the students. Nowadays lecturers only add value if they continuously gain experience from practice. Therefore, we encourage teachers and students to learn together with partners in the communication field.

Lessons learned: Communication Studies in transition

From the past to the future: developing a new curriculum

Internet and social media challenge the way we organize society. They provide new possibilities of interconnectedness and new ways of organizing things (Castells, 2007). Jobs of communication professionals are so closely linked to these transformations in society, that their role is changing rapidly (Van Ruler, 2015b). For the foreseeable future, there is no reason to believe that this dynamic will slow down. Therefore we face the challenge to educate young people to become competent partners in dialogue with a constantly evolving society. This situation is especially fit to describe the case of communication studies. Students need to be prepared for the demands put on them when they become professionals in the field. It is challenging to keep a study program up to date when dealing with rapidly changing professions in dynamic disciplines.

Professional education under such circumstances calls for more than just updating the content of a program now and then. At the Ede University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, we launched a new curriculum for Communication Studies. In order to enable students to become competent partners in dialogue with society, just redesigning the curriculum was not enough. We also had to rethink the way the curriculum was organized. It was necessary to transform the educational system and redefine the lecturers' role. In this process we were facing various issues: How do we develop our curriculum in a flexible way? How do we structure our faculty to be able to deal with constant innovation? What exactly is the role of the lecturers in the educational system? The aim of this paper is to summarize the answers we formulated for Communication Studies in Ede and explain the rationale behind the design choices. The chapter is structured as follows. *First*, we summarize four key transitions in the professional field of communication, which guided our choices. *Second*, we

map out the consequences of these key transitions for the design of an educational program. *Third*, we illustrate the transformation process of Communication Studies in Ede, describing several cases. *Fourth*, by means of conclusion, we extract the lessons learned and formulate some suggestions for educators or communication professionals facing similar challenges.

Four key transitions in the field

Development of new technologies and social transformations related to these technologies have major implications for the profession of communication, and thus also for the education of communication professionals. The pace of change and the impact of this flux can be overwhelming and disheartening. Therefore, we needed a clear vision on what we identified exactly is at stake. We identified the following four key transitions in the communication field that are important for the education of future professionals:

Key transition 1. A new professional role: from communication department to the communicative organization.

Instead of broadcasting all kinds of messages from a department, communication professionals are more and more faced with the role to facilitate the gaining and sharing of information. The role of a professional captures the configuration of expectations and interpretations of behavior associated with a particular position within an organizational context (Van Vuuren, in press). So, communication professionals face a role change when the organizational context changes in the approach of communication, the use of media or the constellation of communication responsibilities people hold in organizations. The fact that organization members more than ever correspond directly with each other and with the clients, for example by use of social media, provides new challenges and opportunities for communication professionals. The way an organization relates to stakeholders inside and outside the organization has changed, where positioning oneself, let alone informing

stakeholders in a unidirectional way, is just not good enough (Cornelissen, 2014).

Stakeholders need to be involved. As Van Ruler (2015a) puts it: "in a digitalized society […] organizations must function in a public arena of ongoing constructions of meanings done by (self-invented) stakeholders. Consequently, the context of modern public relations is much more complex than the rusted notion of two-way communication with relevant publics implicates."

No longer can organizations be seen as contexts in which communication can flow through predictable channels. Nowadays, the task of communication professionals is to support the organization members to connect with and respond to all kinds of stakeholders in an adequate way. As Zerfass and Viertmann state, communication is becoming an integrative part of the value chain in any corporation, because corporate success doesn't only depend on shareholders, but also on sustainable relationships with employees, politicians, regulators, customers, mass media, social media influencers, and many others stakeholders. Zerfass and Viertmann pinpoint corporate communications as a valuable resource for listening and learning from the environment, which helps to reposition the organization and adjust strategies. "More and more, the communication professional has become a key driver of creating a supportive overall framework for corporate activities." (Zerfass & Fiertman, 2016) Students should be prepared to play such a role in an organization.

Key transition 2. A new set of knowledge and skills: from sending & broadcasting to listening & conversation management.

Along with the changed role comes a redefinition of the knowledge and skills that communication professionals need. The key words are connecting, equipping, ensuring and measuring: "As their role has evolved from 'conveyors of information' to strategic business partners, communication professionals are being asked to better connect employees to the

business, equip leaders with the skills and tools to effectively communicate, ensure that the right messages are 'breaking through the clutter,' and show measurable results – all daunting challenges." (Gay et al., 2005). Gone is the possibility of delegating communication responsibility to the communication department.

Take marketing communication for example. Traditional marketing heavily relied on a sender-based communication model. Customers were simply flooded by marketing messages. The Internet fundamentally changed this communication model (Winer, 2009).) Marketing became social marketing, affording customers to talk back to the organizations and exchange their experiences with products and services by online channels. The rise of the Internet opened up alternative means for communicating: more valuable, as these data became useful for targeting personalized marketing to customers. But it also made marketing more complex, because everyone can become a communicator of a brand.

What applies to marketing communication also applies to other types of communication. The pervasiveness of the Internet and social media involves everyone in the dialogue, which means that organizations loose the opportunity to delegate such activities to a communication professional. Directors, managers and employees need to be supported in their communication role. Therefore, the future communication professional needs more coaching- and training skills, as well as experience in building communities, using big data and managing conversations (online and offline). Future professionals will have to be prepared for this before they set a first foot on the market- or even earlier through internships.

Key transition 3. A new professional attitude: from skilled craftsmen to reflective practitioners.

A professional is a person that has access to a certain body of knowledge and skills. That, however, is not enough. A professional also has to know what kind of knowledge and skills is

needed in a particular situation. Professionals must be prepared to choose the right intervention at the right time, in dialogue with their surroundings. They have to be reflective professionals that know what to do in a specific context. It is in interaction with the situation that a professional attitude reveals itself. (Schön 1983, 49 ff.).

For a long time professionals were regarded as skilled craftsman, as persons who were able to translate scientific knowledge into practical solutions. Such a scientific-technological approach, however, does not work any longer. Due to a growing complexity in our society, communication professionals nowadays have to act adequately in individual, unique and basically unrepeatable situations. In working situations a lot of improvisation is needed. For a long time professionals could rely on standard methods that were considered to be effective always and everywhere. Nowadays they have to develop time and again new knowledge and skills in dialogue with various stakeholders in a variety of contexts (Gibbons et al., 1994).

For communication professionals this means that they cannot just rely on the expertise learned. They have to reflect on their own functioning as a professional and the role that they play within an organization or a particular social context. They must be accountable and responsive and also have to be aware of their personal and professional limitations. For the education of future communication professionals this means that transfer of knowledge and skills is not enough. Students have to develop their knowledge and skills in direct interaction with the working field and have to learn to ask the right questions. This implies that within the working field laboratories and learning environments have to be developed in which practitioners, lecturers and students learn from each other and from the way they encounter new unexpected situations.

Key transition 4. A new professional context: from gradual change to constant change on multiple levels.

The development in the organizational context and the professional field as summarized in the first three key transitions shows that professionals will have to face new questions all the time. Paraphrasing Zygmunt Bauman (2013), they will experience that the only stable thing will be change, and the only security will be insecurity. Yes, new areas of knowledge and skills are needed, but the ability to deal with transition itself is even more fundamental. Professionals must be able to adapt to a society that constantly is in flux.

A context of social transformation will be the 'natural habitat' of our graduates. Curricula will have to prepare future professionals to formulate answers to *questions we are now not even aware of*. Therefore, students have to be trained to cope with constant change on multiple levels. The professional field is well aware of this, as Tench and Murano (2015) showed recently. They found that communication practitioners in Europe stress the importance to adapt to changing circumstances and new contexts, as well as to the increasing rates of organizational and cultural change. This makes sense. Not just the role of communication professionals is changing today. Moreover, it is hard to predict how this role will evolve in the future. With the rise of more fluid social organizational constellations (e.g. movements, platforms, collectives), we cannot provide the clarity of role structures for potential members of a profession. On the contrary, facing temporary, partial, virtual, and networked organizations (Bechky, 2006; Koschmann, 2013), people will have to redefine their roles time and again. Therefore, it is important for Communication Studies to not just redefine the role of organizational communication, but especially let students gain experience in redefining their own role in the workplace and teach them how they can win their 'license to operate' in various settings.

From quality college to adaptive organization: Education in transition

As we have seen, communication professionals face role changes in more complex environments. Faced with the four transitions in the field, we knew we could not deliver with just changing the content of the curriculum. Although our findings led to adjustments in the content of the curriculum, we recognized that the transitions in the communication field ask for fundamental changes in our educational system. If we want our graduates to become reflective practitioners, who are able to adapt to constant change on multiple levels, we couldn't succeed with some minor changes to courses and programs. In order to achieve abovementioned goals, we need to change the way we organize the educational organization as well, improving the collaboration between lecturers and students and redefining the role of the teaching staff. In this section, we summarize the three main building blocks of a future proof educational program: (1) the structure of the organization, (2) the content of the curriculum and (3) the role of lecturers in relation to students. In this section, we will summarize the rationale for changing these three areas.

First of all, *the structure of the organization* needed to change: from fixed and predictable programs to challenging learning environments, where students are trained in dealing with change and where they are encouraged to develop the attitude of a reflective practitioner.

Second, *the content of the curriculum* had to be upgraded and modernized as well. From knowledge-driven content to open-ended real life assignments with a focus on developments in the field of Communication. And above all, a curriculum that prepares students for a new aspect of their future job: supporting all kinds of organization members in their communication role. Along with the new knowledge and skills that are required to contribute to a communicative organization.

Third, we know that organizations thrive or suffer through the actions of individuals. So, the *role of lecturers* in relation to the students had to match our vision. From lecturers in an expert role (transmitters of knowledge) to lecturers in a role of reflective senior practitioners,

collaborating where apposite, coaching when needed. Communication Studies needs lecturers who know how to function in a learning organization, and how to use their seniority in knowledge and experience educationally. Co-creation, reflection and a learning attitude are key words in this transition. In the next section, we will report on the changes we went through at Communication Studies in Ede.

From quality college to adaptive organization: changes in Communication Studies

In retrospect, we can identify three areas where fundamental transitions had to be made, in order to meet the expectations of a profession in transition: an agile and up-to-date educational environment. These areas are: *the organizational structure, the curriculum* and *the role of lecturers*. In this section, we will report on the changes in these areas.

1. *The organizational structure.* In order to design a challenging learning environment in which creativity and innovativeness may flourish, a flat and flexible organization was needed. Decentralization generates a climate in which people are very much aware of their own professional role and their functioning as a person within the organization Centralization, on the on the contrary, can lead to the loss of a feeling of ownership. Occasionally, staff and students did perceive the university as a complex and hierarchical organization, which prevents them from having a say in major (educational) topics.
   In order to stimulate role awareness we were opting for a flatter structure. Maden (2015) showed how decentralization fosters knowledge creation because more individuals become more involved in decision-making, generating a great number and variety of ideas (which may result in the creative integration of divergent perspectives) and helping to ensure the successful implementation of the chosen ideas. Therefore – before we started with the curriculum development - we choose to restructure the organization in terms of decentralization.

How did we do that? In the former curriculum, one team manager was responsible for the content of the curriculum, as well as budgets and staffing. Lecturers used to 'deliver' their lessons in a fixed education program, sometimes without the necessary knowledge about the coherence in the program. In the new curriculum the position of the team manager was replaced by teams of lecturers (decentralization). Each team focuses on its expertise in one core competence in the communication field and is made responsible for a part of the curriculum. This means that a team takes care of the lecturing and coaching, as well as the evaluation and improvement of the educational unit. Development teams are free to choose their staffing (based on availability) and each team is allocated a budget. The teams are trained in curriculum development and didactics. In three years' time, these teams have developed the new curriculum.

The process of decentralization and increased self-management led to more autonomy of the lecturers, as members of the development teams. As a result, we see that creating educational ownership improved knowledge sharing and idea generation among lecturers during the process of curriculum development.

2. *The content of the curriculum.*

In line with the transitions in the field, we designed a curriculum that prepares students for a new aspect of their future job: supporting all kinds of organization members in their communication role. In the former curriculum, the emphasis was on communication roles such as advising and creating and also on conceptual domains such as External communication, Internal Communication and Marketing communication. In the new curriculum has been chosen for an integrated approach and an additional focus on new roles such as coaching, counseling and training. In the first three years, each quarter of the education program focuses on one of the core competencies that professionals need to

contribute to a communicative organization. Students are encouraged to develop sensitivity in observing. Also, they learn how to tune in perceptions of stakeholders and how to facilitate a dialogue (on a beginner level). Moreover, students learn how to design a workshop, how to meet the educational needs of the target group and how to train in an effective and appealing manner. Another example: third year students at internship welcome first year students to 'their' organization. The trainee provides training-on-the-job for the first year student. Furthermore, in the specialization phase of Communication studies, students can opt for a semester specialized in the supporting role of communication in the communicative organization. This minor is called *IC Change* and contains subjects like advanced training skills, community building, conversation management, the art of dialogue (with an important role for 'listening'), change management and organizational storytelling. Also we added to the curriculum several subjects to enhance social media skills, such as online reputation management, web care, website design and intranet. In the near future we hope to offer new courses about big data. Finally, we promise our students that each educational unit is (and stays) up-to-date and 'real'. That means: every quarter, students must gain experience in the field of communication and do assignments for real clients. We owe this to our students, to make sure that the curriculum will keep pace with developments in the field. With all these renewals, we expect our graduates to meet the expectations in the field according to the new set of knowledge and skills and the changing role of the communication professional.

3. *The role of lecturers.*

The ongoing development of the profession has huge implications for the role of the teaching staff. The lecturer used to be the expert. He shared his knowledge with the newcomers, the students. Nowadays, with society in transition, lecturers only add value if

they continuously gain experience from practice. Therefore, we replaced *dialogical learning* (in which students learn from lecturers) by *trialogical learning* (in which teachers and students learn together with partners in the communication field). In a trialogical learning environment, the role of an educator changes from an expert role (a transmitter of knowledge) to the role of a reflective senior practitioner, collaborating with students where apposite, coaching students when needed. This role change is necessary because nowadays, acquiring reflection skills and critical thinking skills is as important as acquiring knowledge about scientific theories and models. The reason is, that as mentioned before, that all professionals have to develop their knowledge and skills in dialogue with various stakeholders in a variety of contexts. Lecturers have to be 'living proof' and have to set an example in critical thinking and reflection. Van den Bosch (2015) states, that the stepwise acquisition of critical thinking, communication and reflecting skills requires that students participate regularly in collaborative research, tackling real-life problems, resulting in papers, presentations and discussions and thorough feedback. Projects offer the best opportunity for students to go through this process. In the new curriculum, working alongside students on a project in the communication field will be a preferred role for lecturers, especially in the specialization phase of Communication Studies. Trialogical learning aims to let students become critical thinkers and reflective practitioners, who are able to judge deliberately and are prepared to deal with diversity within organizations and within the globalizing world. Teaching methods such as lectures will stay in the curriculum as a supportive means. But, as van den Bosch explains, the future of viable business education lies in collaborative learning networks:

> *"Ability to bridge the gap between theoretical, practical and tacit knowledge is a*
> *major requirement for viable business education. No single university or other*

organization has the capabilities that are needed to achieve this goal. Collaborative learning networks have to come in place and universities might be able to contribute significantly. The development of a learning network with participants from different angles (companies, not-for profit organizations, consultants, government and universities) is a necessary step to develop and supervise dedicated education and for doing research and initiating innovation as well." (Van den Bosch, 2015)

From experience to best practice: lessons learned

The whole change process was challenging, yet necessary, given that education programs need to keep up with dynamics in society. Therefore, it was not enough to transform the curriculum, but we had to reinvent the organizational structure and the lecturers' educational role. Although we went through some hard times, the results prove us right: after two years working with this new curriculum, student satisfaction raised (with 14%, according to the most recent survey) and most of the lecturers report and show more ownership for their part of the curriculum and commitment to the Communication Studies program as a whole. In this final section, we summarize the lessons we learned during the transition process of building the new curriculum in two sections (decentralization and an agile curriculum). We formulate suggestions for educators who face similar challenges.

Decentralization

Decentralization added great value to the quality of education and increased employee satisfaction. Professionals not only survive, but can really thrive when they see that management was not just paying lip service to the call for professional autonomy. They can deal with significant degrees of freedom, and experience ownership of the process.

Each development team chose a different approach to address professional issues and used different teaching methods to train students in their professional role. The students participating in the new curriculum were happy with that variety of themes, didactics, lecturers, trained skills and experiences in the communication field. In evaluations, students give back that they feel as if they started every quarter a new education, which they meant as a compliment (as we have checked). It contributed to their adaptability and their knowledge of sub disciplines in the field. Looking back, we can say that educators as well as students gained from the move to decentralization. Both parties were challenged to adjust constantly to new contexts.

However, those benefits do have some negative side effects. First, the paradox that autonomy calls for coordination. Although it was inspiring that each development team experienced a high degree of freedom, the teams needed to align their educational units, in order to make sure that all competencies were proportionally covered. During these three years of curriculum development, we were facing what we call "meeting fatigue". Of course, we had to secure the educational level and consistency in testing and assessing. This process of aligning the separate parts costs serious time and energy resources. Secondly, it is fair to say that not all lecturers could keep up with the rapidly changing educational context. Lecturers are not experts in everything, of course, and a change process like this called for professional competences not all lecturers embodied. Fortunately, the majority of the teaching staff took it well.

In short, decentralization leads to committed lecturers and an increased feeling of ownership, and, principally, it leads to a learning environment where students automatically adapt to constant change and got used to redefine their professional role every three months. The profession of communication asks for future professionals that are prepared for rapidly

changing contexts. Therefore we designed an innovative learning environment wherein constant (professional) change is just normal, starting from day one of their professional education. Such lean-based principles (cf. Van den Bosch, 2016) helped us to achieve what we aimed for, while we also endured the tough side of change. We suggest educators who aim for such goals to:

- Create small, committed teams as the basic unit for curriculum development. They plan, design and execute educational units. Make them responsible for as many as possible activities associated with the program, including activities and budgets;

- Be aware of the need for coordination among those teams, as they may tend to develop their units in isolation

- Celebrate the successes (especially when others mention them) and be alert when difficulties arise (like colleagues who cannot keep up with the change)

An agile curriculum

The responsibility for the agility of the curriculum lies with the professionals. They are the ones who monitor the progress and define the adaptations. But the absorptive capacity to secure continuous agility calls for openness to others, including students and partners in the field. Therefore, we decided to evaluate our efforts on recurring occasions. First, we invest time and money each year to improve our curriculum. Allocating valuable resources to a cause is a good way to ensure it receives its proper attention. We meet with students and survey their impressions continuously. We ask them to collaborate in improving the curriculum each year. Apart from the annual evaluation, their input is also asked for in every three months in progress reports in meetings with the management. Second, we reach out to 'external' stakeholders and invite them to support our search for continuously updating our

curriculum. The partners with whom we collaborate through internships, thesis projects and research are an invaluable source of information. Some of those professional partners are officially linked to the program in an advisory board (our 'werkveldadviesraad'), who evaluate not only their direct experiences, but the curriculum as a whole. Third, through the close collaboration with the professional field, lecturers have direct contact to these developments. They witness and experience the profession firsthand. Sometimes, they learn as much as the students. These experiences also secure agility in the ongoing development of the program. So, we urge educators who aim for an agile curriculum to focus on others, not themselves. This includes:

- Frequent evaluation meetings with students, both during the training program and afterwards. This maximizes students' participation and engagement and you can learn from their experiences;
- Invite external stakeholders and listen to what they say about the developments they witness and the type of professionals they are looking for;
- Make sure that every colleague meets the professional field. Dedicate time of all team members to engage in the evaluation process.

A final thought

Keeping a study program relevant in the dynamic communication discipline calls for continuous efforts to align the learning experiences of your students to their future profession. We elaborated on our experiences and summarized the learning points for those who agree on the importance of our mission. In order to design a communication program, we need to communicate a lot. We will have to meet, discuss, explore and collaborate: with colleagues, students, managers, and professionals. We will need to learn to listen. This is an opportunity

to give our communication students the most valuable and effective instruction available: by

teaching through our own example.

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