

The Current State of Communication Education in Ghana: A Critical Analysis of Stories from the Field

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ABSTRACT

Narratives offer academic communities a moment of reflexivity. However, stories told by members in academic communities are under-studied. Drawing on Wenger's idea of community of practice, the present study examined the narratives of 12 senior communication educators in three public universities in Ghana, and how the narratives shape the knowledge economy. Using field notes, technical documents, and structured interviews, the study revealed that community practice in the field of communication education in Ghanaian public universities is constrained by a not so vibrant community that faces challenges in localising a Western curriculum, and is yet to coordinate its local language research agenda.

Keywords: *communication education, community, knowledge economy, narrative, university*



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Introduction

The knowledge economy is associated heavily with brain power, creativity, and other so-called human capital. It is also associated with processes of learning, communication, and social networking, and always technology enhanced (Brandt, 2005, p. 167).

This study examined how the narratives of 12 senior communication educators in three public universities in Ghana shape the knowledge economy. The inquiry focused on

knowledge work in this epistemic community because knowledge fuels economic development by adding value to the production of goods and services, making it more valuable than land, equipment, or even money (Brandt, 2005). Put differently, knowledge-based economy relies more on intellectual capabilities and skills than on natural resources (Powell & Snellman, 2004). An inquiry into the knowledge economy at work in communication departments is, therefore, useful for understanding how faculty produce, manage, and transmit knowledge, and, more importantly, under what circumstances this mode of production occurs.

Using Wenger's (2000) idea of community of practice, I weave the discussion in this paper around the complex textured narratives of eight male and four senior female academics, whose teaching experiences span between 10 and 28 years. In doing so, I enter into conversation with scholars in professional communication. My goal is to unearth how concerns of *community, identity, meaning, literacies, and hybridity* trouble our understanding of communication education in an international context such as Ghana.

Based on my own self-reflexivity as a communication instructor in Ghana, fieldnotes from direct participant observations at my field sites, minutes from departmental meetings, and in-depth interviews with faculty, I examine the landscape of communication education in Ghana at University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Winneba, and University of Ghana, the three main public universities that run communication and media programmes in the country. The study also examined and challenges informants faced in localising curricula. Participants reflected on local practices that shape knowledge work, how a communication curriculum is designed, and how they ensured that their practices meet students' needs in a local and yet globally competitive society. The reflections in this paper serve as a response to St. Amant's (2014) invitation to communication scholars to "collect and share both their own stories and the narratives of others so the greater field might be explored in meaningful and important ways" (p. viii).

The rest of the paper has four parts. In the first, I review literature on the importance of narratives in professional communication, and argue that not much is known about the stories which communication faculty and administrators in sub-Saharan Africa share about their work. Next, I discuss in detail the interpretive research methods I employed in collecting data for the study. These include the use of participant and field observations, semi-structured interviews, the ethics of transcription, and member-checks. The third strand of the paper offers a nuanced articulation of the narratives of participants by pulling together major threads gathered from the narratives. These are (a) the absence of a vibrant community of practice; (b) challenges in localising the curriculum; (c) the absence of a vigorous research agenda in language education; and (d) an increasingly onerous quality assurance control system. The final section of the paper discusses three implications of the findings for research and theory building in international communication education and intercultural professional communication for both scholars and students in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Value of Narratives in Communication Education Communities

We are the stories we tell. The many ways we choose to tell our stories say a lot about our values. Narratives of tourists about their traveling experiences, for instance, reveal special truths and myths about the places they visited. So too stories told by professionals, such as communication educators, are tokens of their personal observations, convictions, and concerns about their profession. Their 'tales' can help us to interrogate the values of their professional practices. In the preface to the April 1993 special issue of *Communication Education*, Editor Rosenfeld stressed the importance of stories to communication scholarship. According to him, "if we wish our work to be faithful to our own lived experiences, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, if we wish to empower ourselves, then we should value our stories" (Rosenfeld, 1993: 277). Professional narratives such as the ones told by communication faculty offer the discipline a moment of self-reflexivity. The narratives serve as the foundations of our professional culture. They enable us to delve into the past with the hopes of shaping the present. This is why St. Amant (2014) explained that "the stories we tell and how we tell them shape our understanding of what took place at various points in time" (p. v). The writer observed that carefully told stories are important scholarly materials because they present scholars with the opportunity to learn from the experiences of their peers. However, the stories that are told in professional circles are not usually considered intellectually rewarding or theoretically robust. One reason Bridgeford *et al.* (2014) gave for the under-theorisation is that the community has contented itself with stories of how it does work rather than demanding careful, disciplined examination of the forces that influence that work. The reality of this truth is that it presents the work of communication faculty as a kind of random and an unguided practice.

Not surprisingly, research into narratives shaping the practice of communication faculty in the West and other cultures is gaining recognition. Recent studies have explored how such forces as pedagogy, technology, globalisation, budgets, and market demands need to be taken into account when communication administrators tell stories about their work (Andrews *et al.*, 2014). Other studies have also taken a closer look at programmatic assessment by exploring, *inter alia*, questions concerning faculty resistance to change, lack of a systematic paradigm, problems with localising the curriculum (Coppola, 2014), and challenges in designing curricula that sit well in their institutional contexts (Kitalong, 2014). Some scholars have also raised concerns about the palpable nature of the job market and changing priorities of administrators (Raju, 2014).

One way to deal with these challenges, Brady and Kitalong (2014) posit, is to focus on budget management, instructor performance evaluation, and material resource tracking. They suggest that in order to arrive at identifying workable solutions in dealing with programme assessment, for example, it is important that programme administrators employ what they termed as "an emergent problem-solving approach" (p. 34) in a way that allows both faculty and students to participate in activities by sharing their problems as part of the solution. Meloncon (2014) confesses that

sometimes programme evaluation can be painful. Focusing on degrees in technical and professional communication, she noted that it is often difficult for programme administrators to be most productive in a shrinking economic climate.

The concerns above are not so different from those in many African public universities. One of the earliest efforts at reviewing curricula in Africa was a workshop sponsored by United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2002. The workshop gave African communication scholars the platform to review curricula, and reflect on the theoretical and practical issues involved in communication education in West, Central, and Southern Africa (Boafo & Wete, 2002). It is, therefore, sad to note that stories that shape communication and media studies in countries south of the Sahara are often not told. Part of this neglect, as I explained earlier, is because such narratives are considered less academically engaging.

Study Methods

As mentioned earlier, the present interpretive study was conducted at three public universities: University of Cape Coast (UCC), University of Education, Winneba (UEW), and University of Ghana (UG). Except UG which was established in 1949, both UCC and UEW are post-independent state funded universities founded in 1969 and 1992 respectively. The three tertiary institutions are located in the southern zone of the country. Emphasis was laid on these public universities because they are the largest universities that offer communication studies in Ghana

The study was conducted between May 2015 and February, 2018. Having gained consent from institutional review boards, I immersed myself in my field, and expended relatively four hours on every working day for 24 months. I closely observed discursive patterns of conversations between the non-teaching staff and faculty, among faculty, between faculty and administrative staff, and between chairs and faculty. *In-situ* observations showed that the communication departments I studied were business-minded epistemic sites that performed multiple tasks. They attended to the everyday running of the departments by ensuring that courses, teaching schedules, student/lecturer complaints were addressed, and at the same time meeting institutional requirements imposed on them by deans, provosts, and the central administration. My fieldnotes indicate that there was harmony among faculty and their chairs as well as between the chairs and their administrative staff in ways that created an open climate for successful administrative work.

In addition to field observations, I conducted multiple in-depth interviews with 12 senior communication academics. My informants held key administrative positions in the public universities. The interviews were held to grasp participants' nuanced lived experiences about communication education in Ghana. I considered this interview strategy useful so that I could reword questions or statements that were problematic to the outcome of the interviews. As Tracy (2013) noted, "Such an approach encourages interviews to be creative, adapt to ever-changing circumstances, and cede control of the discussion to the interviewee" (p. 139).

This was quickly followed by member-check of the transcribed interviews. I reckoned that there was the need to present informants' narrative reflections of their practices just as they intended to mean. Though I did not submit the entire transcripts to them, I ensured that focal participants went through portions of the transcripts to check whether my representation of their voices was favorable to them (cf. Bucholtz, 2000). I played back their voices to them, and sought to know if they had any questions concerning the interviews in particular.

On the Knowledge Economy of Communication Education in Ghana

In this section, I analyse key issues as discussed by participants. These include concerns about the dynamism of their community of practice, challenges in localising a Western-centric communication curriculum, little research on local languages, and an onerous quality assurance system. In particular, I stress their narrations about communal identity, and how they negotiated the problem of the global knowledge economy.

The Idea of a Vibrant Community of Practice

One of the main findings of my interview sessions with communication scholars in Ghana is that their community of practice is not robust. The community tends to be more *organic* and less *organised*. My analysis showed that the existing community is constituted around two major goals: (a) *legitimate peripheral participation* and (b) *basic practice*, to borrow from Wenger (2000). In terms of the former, I realised that the studied communication departments create a sense of member socialisation for their learners. They teach learners cultural artefacts of the field. It is fair to note that the curricula of these institutions aim at promoting among students what Wenger (2000) terms "a regime of competence." The corollary is to deepen practice, the ability to learn by doing. What is not clear about this practice is the extent students of this community are immersed in this domain. In other words, the analysis of my participants' narratives revealed that communication scholarship in Ghana is still forming. It is possible to assert that the community of communication scholars in Ghana is passive. Going forward, efforts at promoting growth in this community must concentrate on two main ingredients: *professional identity* and *meaning*. As one male participant remarked, "We need to come together as communication scholars." The majority of participants bemoaned the absence of a dynamic professional national organisation and its flagship journal in the country. According to them, this absence smothers progress and inter-institutional engagement. Wenger (2000) posits that communal identity promotes alignment, that is, the coordination of activities and the enforcement of regulations. It also enhances the work of the imagination. In fact, the fragile nature of the community of communication scholars in Ghana has implications for the nature of the curriculum it designs, and the type of research it conducts.

With regard to meaning, my analysis showed that it is increasingly difficult to determine what the goals, aspirations, and prospects of the communication studies

community in Ghanaian public universities and colleges are. The newly launched Communication Educators Association of Ghana (CEAG) in June 2019 at the University of Education, Winneba is yet to conduct a field assessment of the discipline in the country. Considered as semi-autonomous institutions, Ghanaian public universities, it seems to me, find it difficult to collaborate on academic projects. It is an unfortunate development because despite their original mandates, the public universities in the nation run a number of similar academic programmes.

Challenges in Localising a Western Curriculum

Communication education in Ghana is also fraught with challenges in localising curricula. As a result of the absence of an active community of practice, each university emphasises different literacies and competencies. Participants noted that it is difficult to localise communication curricula because of a number of factors. These include (a) colleagues' avid preference for and dependence on Western theories; (b) the geopolitics of knowledge production; and (c) reticence to engage the local. Although some participants proposed and proffered the idea of theory hybridisation, my analysis indicated that this idea remains an ideal. I realised that concerns about localisation and hybridisation are difficult to manifest in the Ghanaian educational system because of the lack of a coordinated research agenda.

First, a number of scholars in Ghana, my analysis shows, have not thoroughly considered the issue of hybridising curricula. And because it is not useful to create a dualism between the local and the global, it is important to note that many literacies taught in communication departments in Ghana (academic communication, broadcast journalism, advertising, public relations, *etc.*) writ large are becoming mobile. It must be pointed out that though the West will remain for a long time the center of knowledge production and distribution, one cannot deny that some of its practices have mostly been influenced by scholarly and professional practices from non-Western cultures. Take, for instance, the theoretical relevance of the Ghanaian concept of *Sankofa* in Asante's (2008) notion of Afrocentricity, a principle that admonishes scholars to dig deep into the recesses of African knowledge systems in order to guide their pathways into the future. An analysis of the narratives points to a number of theoretical lineages that have, thus, far shaped the curriculum. See Table 1.

Table 1: Some theoretical paradigms of communication education at three public universities in Ghana

Sub-field	Major Paradigm	Brief Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
	Aristotelian logic	Writing as a linear process	Encourages clarity of thought.	Stifles creativity and imagination.

Academic Comm.	Process-based writing	Writing as progressively evaluative	Ideas are well developed over a period of time.	Is time consuming; not suitable for large classes.
	Product-based writing	Writing as summative	Is economical to instructors; makes students more responsible.	Can make slow learners become poor students; there is less time for revision.
Comm. Studies	Sociocultural tradition	Explores how humans make meaning in everyday interaction.	Sees communication as symbolic and socially constructed.	Can be difficult to explore from a social science perspective.
	Agenda setting/Framing	Examines the role of the media in influencing public relations messages.	May be useful for students' internships and case studies.	Has become commonplace.
	Discourse studies	Analyses language use and its effects in society.	Emphasises the role of language in communication.	Can be quite difficult to teach in view of various strands.
	Rhetoric	Examines the strategic use of communication targeted at specific audiences, contexts, and purposes.	Is useful for expanding the field of communication.	Can be reduced to academic and political communication

Source: Field Data (2019)

Questions of localising or blending local curricula with Western principles are, therefore, political. What elements need to be localised? In what ways can an indigenous thought be coterminous with foreign intellectual insights? One female participant indicated that the curriculum of her department is heavily Western-centered. This development was, however, not surprising to her because, according to her, communication studies, like formal education, is a Western product. When I probed further into the merits and demerits of this development for scholarship in Ghana, she took great pain to explain that upon her return to Ghana, she and her colleagues have been looking for ways to localise their institutional curriculum although, she admitted, doing so has been an uphill task. The female academic

attributed the difficulty to lack of *a change of mindset*. In her view, faculty in Ghana are used to *received wisdom*. In other words, the identity of many Ghanaian communication faculty is, often, enacted, shaped, and constructed by the language, traditional norms, and practices of Western communication scholarship.

According to her, it is difficult to change the curriculum as a result of structural constraints, a view Coppola (2014) holds. She stressed that because Western communication education is powerful, there is always the need to consider it as an international programme so that faculty can learn from best practices. She added that communication is a human endeavor so that whether its theories are from the West or from Africa, the fundamental idea is to communicate. She was, however, quick to point out that the general sense of communication in Ghana is mass communication. This sense, in her view, is unfortunate because the West looks at communication from both the mass media and intercultural perspectives. She noted that though there is a fixation on mass communication in Ghana, attention is now being paid to indigenous ways of communication, and, therefore, urged scholars in Africa to conduct their research by taking time to investigate happenings in their local contexts. The importance of such a proposal, he posited, is to create an identity for the community of African scholars in communication studies that can challenge or run as an alternative to conventional communication scholarship. This effort, in the thinking of Taylor *et al.* (2004), is crucial to permit a better understanding of the African communication environment.

In her own way, she tries to localise major theoretical ideas whenever she teaches, and insists that her students do the same. Using reception studies as an example, one of my male focal participants told me that he always insists that his students analyse the content of local Ghanaian films. In his view, though reception theories may be Western, he always attempts to apply them to the local context. He noted that one way of localising Western-based communication theories is to hybridise them with African knowledge systems. "Hybridity creates ownership," he stressed. In his view, hybridity creates new identities because it blends Western theories with the Ghanaian situation. He insisted that he has never applied Western ideas without localising them even though he uses textbooks written by Western scholars. "How do the ideas I read from this scholar fit in my local context? How do our indigenous forms of communication subvert or challenge the norm?" He inquired. He calls indigenous forms of communication *bodies of subversion*. In fact, his narrative merits a few more comments. In *Hybridity*, Kraidy (2005) argued that the act of hybridising a product is a unique political practice. He maintained that hybridity grants users active agency as it is they who select what needs to be appropriated and what needs to be rejected. This, however, does not mean that hybridity is free from *friction* as social agents may sometimes find it difficult to reconcile the local and the global. The professor may be right about the afore-mentioned point because in his view "some ideas may be thought to be universal and yet may not be applicable to one's local context."

Lack of a Coordinated Research Agenda in Local Language Education

Little interest in indigenous communication has also laid its grip on research in local literacies and local languages. Less emphasis on promoting Ghanaian languages as part of efforts at enriching the communication curriculum frustrates attempts to make students understand the norms and practices involved in indigenous communication. James (1990) urged scholars to place importance on local literacies to promote local language proficiency. Another female professor, however, cautions that this is not going to be an easy prospect. She explains with empirical data obtained from interviews with policy makers, teachers, parents, and undergraduate students that although local languages are worth studying, the evidence suggests that these stakeholders see fewer returns accruing from their pursuit as academic disciplines. She argued that while a number of Ghanaians speak favorably about local language education as a marker of identity, the majority doubt the cultural capital these languages generate in a globally competitive world. Looking at this development, I would suggest that efforts to introduce local literacies and/or Ghanaian languages into the curricula of communication institutions should focus on exposing students to dominant functional literacies. I mean to say that the attempt must be progressive so as to make learners understand the reasons underlying the need for becoming literate in their own local languages.

An Onerous Quality Assurance Control Mechanism

The narratives of participants also showed that it is difficult to constantly determine institutional quality. The study revealed that quality assurance often takes the form of departmental audit and self-evaluation which are internal in scope vis-à-vis the mandated, snail-paced processes of institutional and programme accreditation. Part of the difficulty, I argue, obtains from the passive nature of the scholarly community of practice in Ghana. Even though there is little information that regulates the nature of quality in communication education in many African countries, communication experts in Ghana should investigate issues concerning how to improve upon practice, what is needed to implement collective initiatives, and what their priorities are for building capacity (see Materu, 2007). A World Bank sponsored study of 220 public universities across 52 countries in Africa, for example, evidently shows that barring the twin challenges of cost and human capacity, there is a growing sense of a pan-African benchmark for measuring the quality of higher education. Materu (2007) cites issues of mission and vision, physical and technological resources, number of students, and qualification of staff as key determinants. Other factors include quality of learning opportunities, managerial effectiveness, quality enhancement research, community involvement including partnership with industry, and future plans.

Conclusion

The findings in this study bring to light a number of implications for communication education. I address only three here. First, the discussions emphasise the need for stronger international and professional partnerships between universities in the West

and those in Africa. It is hoped that the analysis will expose the international community to the stories, lived experiences, and values scholars in a non-Western culture, such as Ghana, place on programme administration, in general, and communication education, in particular. The narratives are useful for sharing expertise among colleagues from diverse cultures. One such active partnership could be fostered with the International Communication Association (ICA) and National Communication Association (NCA). NCA, for instance, publishes 11 academic journals, and provides its members with a wealth of data about the communication discipline. The association also organises programmes that serve to disseminate relevant information about communication to public audiences, and disseminates communication scholarship broadly through regular media outreach, and a robust social media presence¹. Such an effort must carefully reflect on the local needs of faculty and students.

Second, the reflections in this paper are important for promoting intercultural, academic, and professional communication. The need to learn from other cultures in an interconnected society is of utmost concern. Such a move is in recognition of attempts to globalise communication studies (José, 2014), and to create job opportunities abroad. Or as Brady and José (2009) rightly pointed out, “If the globalisation of the workplace increasingly requires that students be prepared to work in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts, US curricula in technical communication often do not meet these new demands” (p. 41). The more scholars and students from the West become accustomed to the contextual cues necessary for appreciating the values and practices of other cultures, the more they will be able to conduct informed research, and design culturally sensitive deliverables (Brady & José, 2009).

Finally, the present study provides evidence to challenges that confront administrators of communication programmes. Like Coppola (2014), Raju (2014), and Brady and Kitalong (2014) have shown in the context of North America, faculty administrators in Ghana intimated that communication studies grapples with problems of institutional control, low budgets, and challenges of meeting new market trends. The main difference between the work of North American and Ghanaian administrators, I hold, may be that while communication education in North America has grown in leaps and bounds, it is yet to sprout in sub-Saharan Africa. What this brings to light is that problems facing programme administration and communication education tend to be global in scope. It is for this reason that scholars need to turn to other contexts, and explore how these difficulties are dealt with.

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¹ www.natcom.org/about/

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