Perspective as a Threshold Concept in Business Communication

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Abstract

In this article, the authors present the notion of perspective as a threshold concept in business communication. Using an SoTL framework, the researchers explore the effect of teaching threshold concepts in a summary writing assignment in a foundational business communication class. Working with a close reading methodology, the authors examine the context of perspective as a threshold concept by analyzing students' summary samples for gender bias and explore how close reading can support further research into threshold concepts in business communication.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship in learning in higher education illustrates attempts in business disciplines to use threshold concept theory to identify areas of transformative learning and to foster scholarly discourse around the nature of these concepts in their fields. In addition economics (O'Donnell, 2010; Shanahan, 2016; Shanahan, Foster, & Meyer, 2006; Woodward, 2011), other business-related disciplines are studying how applying threshold concepts to their fields can shape student learning and later professional performance. Examples include computer science (Rountree, Robins, Rountree, 2013), management (Dyer & Hurd, 2018; Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Nahavandi, 2016; Vidal, Smith, & Spetic, 2015), finance (Hoadley, Tickle, Wood, & Kyng, 2015); and entrepreneurship (Bollinger & Brown, 2015; Hatt, 2018).

While other business disciplines have recognized the value in identifying threshold concepts, business communication has not, with the exception of Pope-Ruark (2011, 2012). This paper contributes to the development of threshold concepts in the discpline of business communication by arguing for *perspective* as a threshold concept that shapes student learning and professional development and serves as a marker of disciplinary identity.

In this paper, we collectively refer to objectivity and subjectivity as perspective. Whether it is an informal request from a colleague who asks, "Hey, what did Joe say when you asked about extra coverage at the help desk?", or a written record of decisions made at a meeting, or an executive summary in a formal report to a board of directors, business people frequently select relevant details from one message, summarize them, and report them as objectively, concisely, clearly, and coherently as possible in another message to an audience with a specific need for that information. Perspective is evident in any business communication, particularly when people are called on to summarize. Using it well is requires recognizing the requirements in a rhetorical context for maintaining objectivity, offering an opinion, or recognizing when personal biases impact one's ability to respond appropriately.

When we teach students to select, summarize, and deliver a message, we tell them that a good summary will, of course, be short and that the main points will be logically ordered, but above all, we tell students that a good summary presents the main points of the original content objectively. In fact, business communication textbooks routinely emphasize the need for objectivity whether the message is a routine email, announcement of bad news, summary writing, or any other business genre. One way we do this is by focusing on the audience, telling students that the goal is to keep themselves out of it.

The reason for encouraging this objective (vs. subjective) perspective in business communication is a highly rhetorical one. Business communication is largely transactional (Rentz & Lentz, 2018); people communicate in business for the purpose of completing a task, accomplishing their business goals, or gathering information for decision making. As such, rhetorical principles such as the you-view and audience-centered communication (which require objectivity) are foundational to our field in that following them guides us to think foremost about what our audiences need from us in order for us to conduct our business. If we remain objective, we convey the impression that our messages are based on logic, data, and good business-decision making such that our audience (being logical, data-driven people as well) view our messages as credible. If we are not objective, we may come across as self-serving and inconsiderate, leaving our audiences to wonder "What's in this for me?"

In fields closely related to business communication (e.g., composition), subjectivity is frequently required for writers and speakers to achieve their rhetorical purposes (Lawrence, 2019). However, historically in business communication, we have referenced subjectivity as though it is a bad quality in business communication. Lawrence cites several scholars throughout the last 140 years from early publications such as (e.g., Westlake, 1876; Hotchkiss, 1911; Lomer and Ashmun, 1914) as well as later publications (e.g., Locker, 1998, 1999) who all advocate for the subjugation of the self to the needs of the audience.

At the same time, it seems unlikely that complete objectivity is possible in business communication and that students may sometimes want to consider a subjective perspective. Yeung (2007), for one, found that business reports can be highly subjective. Others, too, (e.g., Plumlee, Wright, & Wright, 2016) have found that students' beliefs, values, and preferences frequently make their way into their messages. Lawrence, as well, noted that some rhetorical frameworks allow for the subjective and objective to be complementary rather than competing (e.g., LeFevre, 1986; Knights and Morgan, 1991). Indeed, while objectivity is and will likely and rightly remain a rhetorical hallmark of business communication, teaching students what it means to be objective requires that they recognize what objectivity and subjectivity look like.

In fact, if messages may never be completely objective, the task for business communication instructors then becomes one of teaching students to recognize subjectivity—points in their messages at which their beliefs and values impact what they say or write—and to ask themselves whether subjectivity is appropriate for their business and communication goals, audience, context, and purpose.

Because students will continually encounter issues regarding objectivity and subjectivity throughout their academic and professional careers, our goal as business communication instructors should be to help students cultivate as their habit the effective rhetorical use of objectivity and subjectivity. However, the examination of perspective as a rhetorical tool in business communication has been largely unexamined other than to reinforce the avoidance of it in pursuit of audience-centered writing and the you-view.

In this article, we introduce perspective as a threshold concept in business communication and by defining threshold concepts and contrasting them with core concepts, argue that students' work itself presents opportunities for cultivating a deep understanding (Pope-Ruark, 2012) of perspective and its impact on their business writing. We contend that this process has the opportunity to transform our students as business communicators. Using one instructor's course assignment as our focus of study, we apply Bass and Linkon (2008)'s close-reading methodology to contextualize and articulate the functionality of perspective as a threshold concept in business communication and how this methodology might help us call out other threshold concepts in business communication as well. Finally, we suggest that instruction that focuses primarily on audience considerations in addition to perspective may provide the critical introspection necessary to identify a writer's own perspective. Our goal is not to critique students' performance on an assignment or suggest that the perspective is not being taught or taught well; rather it is to use one instructor's experience to illustrate the need to elevate perspective to the status of a threshold concept.

This study contributes to the discussion of business communication as a unique academic field; provides instructors with guidance for identifying, operationalizing, and articulating the threshold concept of perspective (i.e., subjectivity and objectivity); and inspires thought about how students may learn the threshold concept of perspective within business communication courses and across the business curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study and articulation of threshold concepts in business communication are under-researched in our field. In fact, a keyword search in *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, the field's primary journal devoted to pedagogy results in only two studies on threshold concepts in business communication. In one, Clokie & Fourie (2016) conclude that business communication courses teach the communication skills that employers seek but that students' competencies with these skills—the ability to adapt these skills, particularly tone and style (of which perspective is a part), across contexts—is lacking. Adapting and using a concept is discussed as a higher-order competency or threshold competency. In another, Pope-Ruark (2012) defines *threshold concepts* more specifically in the context of using scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to uncover and articulate threshold concepts in a discipline. Pope-Ruark (2011) also published an article in the *International Journal on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* on audience analysis as a threshold concept in business communication. Beyond these three articles, there appears little else published in our field regarding the threshold concepts that distinguish what we teach and what our students learn.

Defining Threshold Concepts

In their original report on threshold concepts, Meyer and Land (2003) note that the conceptual framework was introduced as a way to differentiate between outcomes that "represent 'seeing things in a new way' and those that do not" (p. 1). They say that threshold concepts are critical to the learner because they represent liminal learning spaces where students can not progress until they change the way they think: "Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people 'think' in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline (or more generally)" (Meyer and Land, 2003). Meyer and Land (2003) argue that these concepts are linked to Perkins's (1999) notion of *troublesome knowledge*, or concepts that are challenging for learners to understand and that require a change in thinking. One aspect of threshold concepts is that this changed way of thinking is generally irreversible (Meyer and Land, 2003), thus moving the learner through an important stage of liminality (Meyer, 2016).

Scholarship also suggests that establishing disciplinary threshold concepts and calling them out does more than benefit that one discipline. Given the interrelatedness of many disciplines and the development of transferable skills and knowledge across disciplines, Bajada and Trayler (2016) argue their effectiveness at teaching both discipline and non-discipline capabilities, which makes the teaching of threshold concepts "an effective way for preparing graduates for the ever changing needs and expectations of employers and industry" (p. 458). These transferable capabilities include the traditionally labeled soft skills (which would include communication skills).

The distinction between core concepts and threshold concepts is an important one. Core concepts are "building blocks" (Meyer & Land, 2003) that students must understand in order to interpret the way that people in a discipline do their work. For example, in business communication students must understand the core concepts of active and passive voice in order to progress to learning core concepts of writing direct messages in routine contexts or indirect messages in sensitive or bad-news contexts. An example of a threshold concept in business communication, however, is that of the audience (Pope-Ruark, 2011)—a concept that when grasped provides students flexibility to apply their rhetorical understanding of audience not only to the instructor whom they they create assignments for and receive grades from but also to professional and workplace audiences within and outside their disciplines. Because this understanding of audience can change students' views of "writing, the discipline, and possibly the world" (Pope-Ruark, p. 4), audience becomes what Meyer and Land (2006) describe as a threshold concept.

Meyer (2016) addresses the criticism that the notion of *concept* is unclear. He defends the framework by explaining that the original notion of threshold concepts put forth by Meyer and Land (2003) is intentionally open to disciplinary definition, "For present purposes…some concepts are a matter of disciplinary consensus" (p. 466). It is that work of consensus—the philosophical reflection, the pedagogical negotiation, the historical

and epistemological inquiry—that we are arguing for in business communication.

Perspective as a Threshold Concept in Business Communication

Perspective is arguably a threshold concept in business communication. As we have discussed, subjectivity often is marginalized in business communication, frequently being presented as the less desirable alternative to objectivity. Using summary writing as an example, we know that the criteria for writing a summary are a lot like those for writing a summary in any other business genre: clarity, conciseness, coherence, completeness. But summaries in business are about more than just the content that the writer thinks is interesting or helpful. Summaries in business are successful only in that they enable the audience to do something with the information, whether it's using the summary to make a hiring decision, understand report recommendations, follow instructions, or use the information in other contexts.

As a result, to write a summary, students must engage in audience-centered thinking of the content, context, and language that will be most useful to the reader. The point of disjunction (Pope-Ruark, 2012), however, is that the student (writer) has the benefit of the big picture, the nuances, and the context that the reader does not, which is something students either ignore or are not aware of. Frequently this lack of awareness results in summaries that may make perfect sense in students' heads but may not translate well to the reader who does not share the values, identities, or experience that inform the writer's frame of reference.

Many instructors will attest that business students' ability to summarize for an audience's actionable purposes is frequently problematic. For example, when writing an executive summary, students may summarize what they did to write the report rather than the report's key takeaways. Or in summarizing meeting notes, they might editorialize or forget to capture the context sufficiently. Or they include too much information because they do not know how to weed the salient information from the tangential. Or they lose their objectivity. In other words, they do not see that their personal lens impacts their effectiveness as writers. What makes summary writing an activity that supports the threshold concept of perspective, then, is that it is not just a core concept because students understand the mechanics of writing it. Rather, it is a threshold concept because students have to step outside their own experiences and biases for an audience to find their work useful. They have to *change their understanding* of their own place and influence in the writing process. Pedagogies that help students make this type of shift represent "jewels in the curriculum" (Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2005, in Pope-Ruark, 2012, p. 243), and for this reason present optimal artifacts for studying the teaching and learning of threshold concepts

Felten (2013) argues that SoTL must examine learning both in terms of "disciplinary knowledge or skill development [and also in terms of the] cultivation of attitudes or habits that connect to learning" (p. 122). Thus, our examination of how students reveal their perspectives in a contextualized summary-writing assignment, as we build the case for perspective as a threshold concept in our discipline, is worthy of study.

Using SoTL Research to Examine Threshold Concepts in Business Communication

In her discussion of approaches to research in SoTL, Pope-Ruark (2012) proposes SoTL as an ideal lens for exploring threshold concepts in business communication. Because students bring their own biases, viewpoints, and identities to the learning of them that can make students resist learning or that can impede their learning, she argues that the theory of threshold concepts "provides a productive starting point for richly examining the concepts that are truly fundamental to business communication and how our students learn them (or not)" (p. 243); in addition, SoTL research methods are an ideal approach to research on threshold concepts because of their localized, targeted focus.

More generally, business communication research lends itself to what Felton (2013) describes as SoTL's "big tent," encompassing many research methods, avenues for exploration, and goals. Our study of perspective as a threshold concept fits well into Felton's description of SoTL methods in that it is (1) an inquiry into student learning, (2) grounded in context, (3) methodologically sound, (4) conducted in partnership with students, and (5) appropriately public (p. 122). Likewise, our study of perspective through a SoTL lens is generalizable as understood in SoTL: the use of a summary assignment to teach the threshold concept of perspective is widely applicable to any business communication curriculum or classroom (Bernstein, 2018).

METHOD

The design for this study is guided by best practices for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in that it is systematic and evidence-based and focuses on situated classroom practice (Faculty Center for Teaching & Learning, n.d.). In addition, an important component of SoTL research is its public dissemination, and we believe that this study and results will be readily applicable in the business communication classroom.

Purpose and SoTL Framework

Specifically, this study qualitatively examines perspective—both objectivity and subjectivity—in the students' email summaries in a business communication course and the use (or misuse) of perspective relative to the audience, context, and purpose of the students' messages.

Using student assignments as artifacts is common in SoTL research (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). Student consent was obtained. The IRB at the first author's institution confirmed that the project has exempt status.

As several scholars have established (e.g., Bernstein, 2018; Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uler, 2012; Boyer, 1990; Chick, 2014; Felten, 2013), SoTL research encompasses a wide variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Bernstein (2018) acknowledges the dominance of quantitative scholarship in educational and SoTL research because of the influence of the research in social sciences on the field of education. However, he also argues that sound qualitative approaches, too, offer valuable research in SoTL that inform how we understand student learning (Bernstein, 2018; Chick, 2014; Felton, 2013).

Close Reading Model

We adapt Bass and Linkon's (2008) presentation of close reading as a model for textual analysis. Close reading is popular for analyzing literary text (and is the focus of Bass and Linkon's demonstra-

tion of the model in their article), but its format also applies to analyzing students' business writing as textual artifacts.

The components of the close-reading model include inquiry, texts, theory, and argument. Close reading contextualizes analysis within a theoretical framework that leads to an argument that is useful to the reader. The argument, provided it is contextualized in theory and inquiry, is valid insofar as it can be applied to other texts or settings. Bass and Linkon argue that using a close-reading model in SoTL offers student work as textual evidence that supports theory, which then sustains or extends an argument and lends validity to it.

Using this model to analyze the emails in this study offers two benefits. First, it offers us a framework for analyzing these student texts in the context of the theory of threshold concepts. Indeed, one of the outcomes of Bass and Linkon's (2008) study is the conclusion that

> Developing protocols and a vocabulary for reading students' work would…facilitate the process of applying insights from one individual's teaching experience to other, quite different situations. It would perhaps enable a better understanding of the 'threshold concepts' and 'troublesome knowledge' that inhere across the discipline and not just within sub-domains (p. 259).

If, as we have argued, perspective is a threshold concept in business communication, these texts should offer (or not) evidence that our argument has merit.

Second, it helps address the issue of validity. As with generalizability, validity of research findings can also be potentially problematic in SoTL projects with small, discrete populations. In the case of a close-reading model, because the evidence-driven theory supports or extends an argument, an argument gains its validity from the ability to extend it to other contexts. As Bass and Linkon (2008) state, "A good analysis will either validate or amend theory or offer suggestions for refining...practice" (p. 248).

The following sections describe the case assignment that students responded to, the analysis of the emails using close reading and thick description, and the implications for student learning.

Context for the Summary-Writing Email Assignment

Much like Golden's 2018 study in this journal, Author 1 began exploring opportunities to develop a writing scenario that more pragmatically and contextually connected to the types of summaries students would be expected to write for a workplace audience.

Assignment Design

Summarizing notes on a job candidate asks students to demonstrate summary skills outside of a traditional reading assignment and represents a type of writing students may be asked to do in the workplace, yet it is a type of scenario that is not commonly found in business communication textbooks. Using the workplace context of summarizing information from a job interview, Author 1 crafted a scenario in which the candidate is participating in an interview for an entry-level position. Since students would have different majors and areas of specialty, Author 1 had to avoid creating a script that was too technical to avoid distracting students with the content or confusing them with jargon.

Author 1 developed an assignment sheet (contact Author 1 for assignment materials) to provide students context about what their audience will and will not be able to access about the video. The assignment sheet puts students in a situation where they need to sit in on a job interview for an entry-level trainee position. Their manager is unable to make the meeting and is relying on the writer to give them a summary of the interview. Further, students are asked to pay attention to whether or not the candidate explains a two-year gap in their resume, and provide a summary of any information from the candidate that addresses the gap.

The Job Candidate Notes case was administered in two sections of the course in contiguous 7-week sessions to a total of 24 students (14 female and 10 male; 4 international students). One class of 12 students (Session A) was given the video with a male candidate and the other class (Session B) of 12 students was given a video with a female candidate. Each candidate was performing the same script.

Evaluation of the Summaries

Lucas and Rawlins's (2015) business communication competencies serve in Business Writing as guiding language for discussing the features of effective business communication: professionalism, clarity, conciseness, evidence driven, persuasive (Lucas and Rawlins, 2015). For formal assignments in Author 1's Business Writing course, students are expected to attend to and demonstrate competency in all aspects. To this end, the major case assignments for the course have all of the competencies included.

Focusing shorter assignments on certain competencies gives students practice working on these competencies individually, in a low stakes environment. *Professionalism*, *Clarity*, *Conciseness* appear in bold text at the top of the Job Candidate Notes assignment sheet to remind students to focus on these three competencies as they write their summaries. Evidence-driven and persuasive were not primary considerations in this particular scenario, so the instructor excluded them as a focus of this assignment. Students were graded with a check-plus (excellent work, few-to-no issues), check (good, some issues), or check minus (only one assignment because it was incomplete) as an overall grade for this low-stakes assignment, and Author 1 wrote comments about each of these competencies to give students a sense of how they performed in each one.

For the pilot assignment, Author 1 was interested in collecting data about how students performed on the new assignment. To evaluate the effectiveness of the assignment, the instructor calculated the score for these three competencies individually giving each a score of 1-3 (1 = significant issues with competency; 2 = some minor-to-moderate issues with competency; 3 = demonstrates competence). Students did not see this score; instead, it was calculated to identify for the instructor where students performed well and where they needed further intervention. Out of 24 students, the average scores were as follows: clarity, 2.58; conciseness, 2.67; and professionalism, 2.125. Overall, this demonstrates solid performance in clarity and conciseness. While general, these numbers supported the instincts of the professor upon reading the assignments: emails were clearly and concisely written. The lower score in professionalism warranted a second look at the assignments; the next section describes how we used Bass and Linkon's (2008) model to explore the professionalism component in the students' work.

Core Concepts vs. Threshold Concepts: Professionalism vs. Perspective

To efficiently analyze the professionalism component, we selected seven exemplar email summaries from the pool of 24 that specifically and obviously highlight the concept of subjectivity. These emails fit Bronk's (2012) definition of exemplars in that they "exhibit a particular characteristic in a highly developed manner… [and] who are rare, not from the perspective of the characteristics they exhibit, but in the intensity with which they demonstrate those particular characteristics" (p. 1). Further, these email summaries represent a common genre and authentic rhetorical context for business communication. As such, they are a "litmus test for the theories that inform a teacher's approach" (Salvatore, 2002, as cited in Bass & Linkon, 2008, p. 247).

More granularly, these summaries contain features of emails and summaries that matter to business communication instructors,the teaching practices that guide business writing pedagogy—planning, drafting, and editing —and the "theoretical standpoints that influence their assumptions about what matters" regarding audience, tone, and style (Bass & Linkon, p. 247).

This complicated nature makes threshold concepts difficult to analyze using rubrics and, as Quinlan et al. (2013) have claimed, complicated and without a well-developed methodology. Bajada and Trayler (2016) caution against the superficial adoption of threshold concept theory (TFC): "Simply bolting on threshold concepts to existing subjects will have minimal positive effects when compared to a whole-of-course approach. It requires reflection and redesign of the entire curriculum such that the threshold concepts constitute the backbone to the entire degree program" (p. 459).

In using Bass and Linkon's (2008) model of close reading to analyze the students' emails using the inquiry > texts > theory > argument components of the model, we acknowledge that Bass and Linkon do not use student texts as artifacts in their application of close reading to textual artifacts (they use teachers' reflections published in a pedagogy journal); however, they acknowledge that in other publication outlets, student texts are valid artifacts. As we have established, SoTL research also advocates for student work as valid artifacts in situated learning spaces such as the classroom.

Inquiry

In Bass and Linkon's (2008) model, inquiry refers to the types of questions that arise as a result of observation, such as "What does this pattern mean? (p. 247). As we observed these texts, one consistent observation was that students' summaries were clear and concise and yet missed something—not quite professionalism and yet, something.

In the Lucas-Rawlins assessment criteria, qualities such as conciseness and evidence-driven are relatively specific and related to easily identifiable features of the text, but professionalism is a broad category and one that Lucas and Rawlins identify as the most important "because it serves a gatekeeping function for the overall message. Receivers judge messages (and by extension, the senders of those messages) on their professionalism. When messages are deemed unprofessional there can be significant consequences—from messages not being taken seriously to the working relationship between the sender and receiver being damaged" (Lucas and Rawlins, 2015, p. 175-6).

More specifically, Lucas and Rawlins define professional writing as reflecting care, courtesy, and conventionality. Care, is attention to detail and overall correctness and neatness of the text and the overall message. Conventionality is the adherence to commonly accepted features of a particular type of communication (e.g., format).. Courtesy, is "marked by adhering to standards of etiquette, behaving civilly, and demonstrating tact and emotional control" (Fritz, 2013, as cited in Lucas & Rawlins, 2015, p. 176) and "also inherently linked to tone" (Jameson, 2009, as cited in Lucas & Rawlins, 2015, p. 176).

A review of the summary assignments revealed that instructor comments regarding professionalism were related to issues regarding the expression of the candidate's description of their gap in the workplace, encompassing the following part of the video when the candidate discussed the gap in their work experience and how they took time off to take care of their child while their partner returned to work.

Students' summaries of the candidates' responses were clear and concise, but they were not exactly, precisely accurate. The inaccuracy stemmed from the fact that many of the summaries seemed biased, particularly regarding the gender of the candidate. Thus, our inquiry became one where we asked ourselves the following questions:

1. What kind of bias are we really observing?
2. Why, in a writing assignment that requires objectivity, would students so subjectively and so knowingly present their own biases as fact?

Texts

To answer our questions, we returned to the professionalism criteria in the rubric that requires texts be courteous, conscientious, and reflective of a "businesslike manner" (Lucas & Rawlins, 2015). People can be courteous even if they don't feel like it. They can make the effort and see the results of being conscientious. In other words, students can be intentional in their demonstration of these skills. And the rubric can capture evidence (or not) of these behaviors. Our examination of the emails, though, led to the observation that something else was keeping students from demonstrating these behaviors and that students were engaging in writing behaviors that were more nuanced than Author 1 was able to measure via the rubric..

Below are the exemplars in which students reflect the "something" that we observed happening. The italicized and bolded text indicates the problematic sections.

Example 1: Gendered Assumptions

In the video vignettes, the candidates mention that they took time off to care for their child while their partner continued working. The candidate never mentions the partner's gender. Yet in several cases, students made heteronormative assumptions about the partner, as in this example from Kelly's:

> He is a passionate, devoted **man**, who took time off to stay at home with his children while his **wife** was working. I definitely saw an area for concern with his lack of experience, as he has been out of the professional field for a year now.

In this next email, the assumption is that, since the candidate is a man, his partner must be a woman. Several other students, including Mario, made this assumption in similar ways:

> Jonathan stated that his **wife** had limited paid parental leave and had a better job. He decided to become a **homemaker** and raise the son while his **wife** stayed at **her** role.

Upon review, just over half of students (13/24 in both sections) assumed the gender of the partner despite not having enough information to support it.

Example 2: Uncertain Language of Parental Leave

Some students also struggled with the language around parental leave. In the vignette, the candidate uses the term *paid parental leave*. In addition to making an assumption about gender, Stephen also misunderstood the term *paternity leave*:

> I sat in on the candidate's interview and he seems like a good fit for the office. The gap in his work experience was because he took time off to take care of his son, **which is admirable**. When his wife's **paternity leave** was over he decided to stay home when she went back to work.

This particular error may have been one of care, but it also may have been a lack of working vocabulary around workplace leave policies. Two other students made mistakes of this type. The remainder of the mistakes around gender in that students wrote *maternity* or *paternity* leave based on their assumptions of gender.

Example 3: Virtuous Men

One interesting phenomenon in the preliminary results was the description of the male candidates. In a sample of 12 students who watched the video of the male candidate, four students used the word *admirable* to describe him. Kelly and Stephen, above, both had positive things to say about the candidate with Stephen using the word *admirable*. Another student, Matthew, also made a point of highlighting the candidate's *admirable* decision to stay home with his son and what a good father the candidate is:

> When asked about a risk he took to achieve a goal, he told us about taking time off to take care of his children. While I found this **admirable**, he did not tell us about the goal he was trying to achieve, or about any of his professional experience.
>
> I hope this helps explain the gap you saw. I see the potential for this candidate to be a **good father**, a **hard worker** and a **good addition** to our team, but I am worried he does not have enough experience to be able to **handle our work pressure here.**

Here, Matthew is being critical of the candidate for not adequately answering the question, but he still makes sure to emphasize the positive qualities the candidate demonstrates through his anecdote of taking care of his child, though the stress of taking care of a child does not appear to rise to the level of the pressure the candidate will need to handle in the workplace. It raises the question of how Matthew is filling in the scenario with his own biases and assumptions as he assumes a man who would stay home to take care of his son must be a "good father" and "hard worker."

Of the 12 students who viewed the female candidate, not one of them used the term *admirable* to describe her decision.

Example 4: Skepticism of Woman's Leave Description

In the section of students who evaluated the female candidate, the following response from Heidi suggests that she does not completely trust the candidate's account:

> After listening to her interview, I think that she does, in fact, have an **unexplained gap** in her work experience. Although she had a **justified reason to put off her career**, it was unclear whether she took a leave of absence and decided to not return to her original workplace, or if she was asked to not come back.
>
> It seems unusual that she would leave out an explanation as to why she is moving on from her prior work. She **claims** to have **abruptly** come to a **realization about her focus on research and networking, while being at home and taking care of her son—which seems unlikely.** He [sic] says she went stayed home because her husband's **paternity** leave ended. I do not think we were given the full story, and I am skeptical of her credibility needed for this position.

Thomas also described her answer as a story and suggested further consideration: "This is the **story** she gave, but you may want to follow up."

None of the students evaluating the male candidate contested the veracity of the account.

Theory

In this element of Bass and Linkon's (2008) presentation of the close-reading model, theory serves as a basis of the fourth element, argument. Specifically, the eventual argument "gain[s] validity when [it is] grounded in careful attention to texts and engaged with theory" (p. 247). As we considered our questions for inquiry, we theorized that students appeared to sense, but not quite get, the core concepts of professionalism (being courteous, conscientious, and presenting a business-like manner) because they lacked awareness of perspective, a threshold concept that goes beyond using the right words or the polite words. They lacked perspective of how their own subjective, implicit biases regarding gender roles, norms, and stereotypes impacted the assumptions they made and subsequently their ability to be objective. Current research on implicit bias appears to support our theory. *Implicit bias* is defined as

> attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection (Kirwan Institute, 2015, para. 3).

According to a scientific overview in *California Law Review*, "implicit biases… can produce behavior that diverges from a person's avowed or endorsed beliefs or principles" (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006, p. 951). And, in the case of Author 1's students, their behavior diverged from previous training they had in intercultural competence in their required foundation courses. According to Devine (1989), changing one's implicit biases is possible. She says that

> For change to be successful, each time the stereotype is activated the person must activate and think about his or her personal beliefs. That is, the individual must increase the frequency with which the personal belief structure is activated when responding to members of the stereotyped group...the attitude and belief change process requires intention, attention, and time (p. 16).

In light of this research, what had been previously considered as an issue of accuracy in writing a summary becomes more complicated in the candidate notes assignment. In fact, this

lack of accuracy in some cases is an issue of care, but in others, discrepancy in representation of events appears to be a result of a subjective interpretation, rooted in implicit biases, which seemed to increase as students were summarizing a more multimodal, contextual event.

Because implicit bias exists in the workplace, it is reasonable to assume students, as future managers, will come to our classrooms and our workplaces with these culturally cultivated implicit biases that shape their perspectives in ways that do not help them become business professionals. These implicit biases are most certainly examples of subjectivity in students' work and thus moves us toward our argument, which is rooted in two questions: (1) Do these responses help construct an argument for perspective to be understood as and taught as a threshold concept in business communication? and (2) How do we make students aware of how their perspectives (biases/subjectivity) make their way into their work?

ARGUMENT

The research on implicit bias reveals several parallels with our understanding of threshold concepts. Keywords in the definition of implicit bias that apply to the argument we front regarding perspective as a threshold concept include *involuntarily*, *without awareness...or control*, subconscious, and not accessible through introspection. Our implicit biases (perspectives) are reflected in our writing. Our perspectives, then, are more than a core concept that can be operationalized on any rubric. It's true that we could say that biased language is not courteous or that it is not audience-centered, but telling students that it is impolite or presumptuous addresses the skill at the level of a core competencies. Implicit biases go much deeper and, given the above research, it appears that one apt way to address implicit biases that inform students' perspectives in their writing, is to acknowledge that perspective meets the criteria required to be considered a threshold concept:

- It is difficult to learn (Pope-Ruark, 2012).
- It reflects biases, viewpoints, and identities (Pope-Ruark, 2012).
- It represents liminal learning spaces where students have to change the way they think (Meyer & Land, 2003).
- It is challenging for students to learn and understand (Perkins, 1999, as cited in Meyer & Land, 2003).

The analysis of the emails indicates that perspective—recognizing objectivity and subjectivity and using them in rhetorically appropriate ways—should be considered a threshold concept in business communication. As we've established (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Meyer 2016; Meyer & Land, 2003; Pope-Ruark, 2012), threshold concepts are those that are more than just a skill. To master a threshold concept, students adopt the practice of the concept so accurately and consistently that it becomes their habit within their business communication courses and their writing and speaking thereafter.

How we teach threshold concepts is a challenge. In making her case for teaching audience analysis as a threshold concept, Pope-Ruark (2011) advocates for community-based projects in which students receive feedback from multiple authentic audiences. Meyer and Land (2003) advocate actively engaging students in liminal areas. And, indeed, Author 1's contextualized job candidates interview notes assignment, which offers a contextualized experience, has produced opportunities for this type of engagement. Shorter assignments that ask students to frequently reflect on their own perspective as a communicator, used consistently and between larger assignments, may help students foster a more flexible mindset about their own relationship to their audience. In other words, these activities teach threshold concepts in an environment where a concept is taught consistently and reinforced and where students have time and space for engaging in those liminal spaces. However, the most important way to teach threshold concepts such as perspective, is to, as Bajada and Trayler (2016) argue, develop an entire curriculum with these concepts in mind, which for many of us teaching business communication would require a shift in mindset of our own.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Consistent with practices in SoTL scholarship this study systematically examines a widely discussed topic in our field, makes it publicly available to business communication instructors who teach objectivity and subjectivity, and may be applicable (the SoTL term for *generalizable*) to those who teach in our discipline (e.g., Bernstein, 2018).

This paper also has implications for how we think about perspective in our field. Lawrence (2019), for example, examined the role of the self in writing employment documents and discusses the commodification of the self as one of the defining features of resumes, cover letters, and LinkedIn profiles. The discussion of perspective also has the potential for discussion in research or classroom activities on intercultural competence.

Lastly, this paper contributes to the discussion of what constitutes threshold concepts in the discipline of business communication. Business communication is not as well defined a field as the closely related fields of technical communication and composition. Nor does business communication have a history of producing a large and cohesive body of scholarship that contributes to defining who we are and what we do. Scholarship that articulates not only what we do but who we are is important, and the identification of threshold skills is one way to develop that scholarship. Therefore, to support a high level of teaching and learning in business communication, our professional and scholarly communities must create and support scholarly venues for sustained discussion articulating the fundamental mindsets of our field. Without this definition and introspection, we will lack an essential component of pedagogical disciplinarity.

Understanding perspective and being intentional in its use is a threshold concept not just for summary writing but for many other workplace activities. Students are not going to understand what it means to be culturally competent in the workplace until they understand their own perspectives. We plan to engage in further research that more comprehensively scans the curriculum, materials, and outcomes of our business communication courses to examine how we prioritize subjectivity as a threshold concept. Further, we hope to see greater discussion of the concepts that rise to the level of threshold concept in business communication. The more instructors are able to identify and study these learning experiences, the more we will be able to define the work of business communication and improve teaching methods. Developing pedagogies that are authentic, contextualized, and engaging in ways that result in a permanent, transformative change in our students and that lend themselves to SoTL are critical not just for

helping our students but also for advancing the field of business communication and its instructors..

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