



Mapping Research Directions in the Introductory Communication Course: A Meta-Synthesis of Published Scholarship

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Abstract: The introductory communication course has a history of producing meaningful scholarship that shapes teaching and learning at institutions of higher education around the world. The scope of this research is broad and, as such, calls for a meta-synthesis of trends in and avenues for future research. This project examines published work from the past decade—2010 through 2019—in key outlets that regularly publish introductory course-focused research (*The Basic Communication Course Annual*, *Communication Education*, *Communication Teacher*, *The Journal of Communication Pedagogy*). This analysis of 98 articles revealed that publications tend to focus on three primary areas: (1) students and instructors, (2) the structure of the course, and (3) assessment—while calling for future research to “replicate” past studies. Based on this meta-synthesis, we propose directions for future scholarship that will continue to impact teaching and learning practices beyond replication.

The introductory communication course typically focuses on public speaking, interpersonal communication, or a hybrid of the two areas (NCA, n.d.). It is also frequently required as a general education “front porch” of the discipline course (Beebe, 2013). In this role, the introductory course welcomes and exposes new undergraduate students to the major and serves as an entrance to academic careers for graduate students and future faculty (Valenzano et al., 2014). The general nature of the course

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also exposes those outside the discipline to communication, making it an important outward facing component of the discipline.

The introductory communication course also serves as a foundation for important research that shapes teaching and learning practices at institutions in the United States (U.S.) and around the world (Morreale et al., 2017). Moreover, students taking an introductory course are often surveyed for communication education—with scholarship exploring the teaching and learning that takes place within the communication discipline (Morreale et al., 2014), as well as instructional communication research—with scholarship examining the communicative strategies used in the teaching and learning process (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006; Sellnow et al., 2015). As such, just as the introductory course serves as the “front porch” of the discipline, research surrounding the introductory course acts as the front porch for communication pedagogy scholarship. One opportunity scholars studying the introductory communication course could capitalize more strategically on is to position this research as it applies to broader audiences both in the discipline and beyond it.

Despite prior research aimed at providing overviews of the introductory course from a variety of specific perspectives, a number of important questions are currently unanswered. For example, what are the prominent areas of research with regard to the introductory course across outlets that publish communication education scholarship? What aspects of the course and pedagogical research are not garnering research attention and what calls for future research have gone unanswered? Thus, meta-synthesis research like this may offer both established and new scholars insight into the knowledge gaps yet to be addressed through future research.

This project examines a broad scope of introductory communication course published in four key outlets from 2010 through 2019, in four key outlets that have historically supported exploration of the introductory course. Ultimately, conclusions drawn here will highlight implications for instructional communication practice, as well as suggestions for future research questions to explore.

Background of Introductory Course Scholarship

Given the prominent position the introductory course holds in the communication discipline (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020), much research has focused on it. This synthesis-focused research ranges from broad overviews (history) to research specific assessment to outlet specific scholarship. The following sections describe relevant research in each of these areas.

Historical Reviews

The long line of research documents the history of the introductory course. Most notably, Valenzano and colleagues (2014) explored the trajectory of the course and tracked its changes and enduring characteristics over time. Here the authors also keep an eye toward what the future could look like given this evolution. Similarly, Morreale and colleagues (2014) traced the evolution of communication education and instructional communication. More recently, Sellnow and colleagues (2015) provide a brief account of the history of instructional communication illuminating four areas beyond the traditional classroom context that benefit from this scholarship: risk and crisis situations, technology-enhanced environments, digital games, and forensics education.

In addition to the previous historically focused studies, Morreale et al. (2010) produced a multi-decade series of survey studies which specifically document the introductory course in its modern form over time. This longitudinal project traces back to 1968 and is currently in its ninth iteration. With the goal of collecting representative data that captures the status of the course at different points of time (2010), the project draws on over 50 years of data collection to provide a documentation of the consistencies and changes of the introductory course. Although earlier editions of the project were primarily descriptive in nature, the most recent edition in the series (Morreale et al., 2016) took a more interpretive approach, using the collected data to look forward. In doing so, the authors developed insights about the progression of the introductory course and made recommendations to continue to build on the “front porch” metaphor (Beebe, 2013).

Assessment Reviews

A second area of scholarship focuses on assessment, such as gauging the effectiveness of course-level and programmatic learning outcomes. In many ways, research examining assessment in the intro course can be difficult to define as a singular area since the scope (e.g., course, program) and focus (e.g., activities, learning outcomes) of the work can vary widely. For instance, administrators can assess learning outcomes that range from cultural competence to effective delivery using a variety of methods that they may or may not classify as assessment research. Despite these challenges, such assessment reviews provide a broad view of knowledge surrounding the introductory course. This research ranges from examining best practices for achieving learning outcomes while others look at the adoption of common core competencies. For example, Engleberg (2016) made the case for adopting core competencies that the introductory communication course should achieve. These competencies serve as central tenets that introductory courses can gather around regardless of the course format (e.g., interpersonal, presentational speaking) and illustrate that undergraduate students meet expected competencies (Morreale et al., 2011).

Outlet-Specific Reviews

A final area of synthesized research in introductory course scholarship is focused on examining work that appears in one specific outlet—the *Basic Communication Course Annual* (see Hunt et al., 2005; Joyce et al., 2019). In the initial synthesis of research appearing in this outlet, Hunt and colleagues (2005) uncovered a lack of empirical and theory-driven research. By 2019, however, 85% of the articles published in the *Annual* were grounded firmly in theory. Although these studies illustrate progress in introductory communication course scholarship, the present essay will provide additional insight from a macro-perspective.

Overall, studies to date focus on three general areas: examinations of history of the course, examinations of course assessment articles, and examination of scholarship published in one specific journal. Although these studies contribute our understanding of the introductory course and the landscape of research in communication pedagogy and instructional communication, this project extends that work to focus on such scholarship published in multiple outlets as it may make a case for publishing such work in a broader array of communication journals. With these overarching goals in mind, we pose the following research question:

RQ: What research trends are reflected in introductory communication course scholarship published between 2010 and 2019?

Method

To answer our general research question, we gathered published articles focused on the introductory communication course from four publication outlets over the past decade. The selected journals were chosen because of their status as nationally-recognized academic journals and prominence as key outlets for introductory course scholarship. The journals for this project included: (1) the *Basic Communication Course Annual*, an outlet devoted to the publication of introductory course research and housed by the University of Dayton; (2) *Communication Education* and (3) *Communication Teacher*, two instruction-focused journals published by the National Communication Association; and finally, (4) the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy*, a peer-reviewed publication of the Central States Communication Association that publishes instructional communication research.

Once the journals were selected, we individually reviewed all volumes and issues from 2010–2019, searching for articles focused on the introductory communication course. A number of specific criteria guided the analysis. These criteria included that some aspect of the article’s research question(s) was focused on the introductory course; that there was a systematic, research-based approach to the work; and that the focus on the introductory course was stated explicitly within the article.

We opted not to include articles where the only connection to the introductory course was the inclusion of introductory course students as participants/respondents. These specific articles did not meet our selection criteria when the focus of the work itself did not pertain to the introductory course. In addition, we did not include teaching ideas and best practices articles but did include reflection essays as those essays included some systematic assessment of practice. These selection criteria, focused on time frame and research emphasis, supported our goal of compiling a holistic view of research focused on the introductory communication course over the past decade. In all, 96 individual published articles were included in the data set.

Once the data set had been determined, we divided the total collection and individually coded for common themes using a constant comparative approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Tracy, 2020). We then met as a team to review our individual analyses—taking the time to problematize and confirm the findings. By completing this process, we were able to illuminate a synthesized view of the research across the decade. Our work was guided by the goal of meta-synthesis of published research focused on the introductory course across the four publication outlets for the entire decade.

Overview of Data Set Characteristics

When examining the full set of articles included in this study, a number of general and methodological characteristics and data emerged as important to note. These data included information regarding authorship, distribution of articles across journal outlets, general methodological characteristics such as article type and study focus, and specific aspects of the research articles including overall method, subjects, and type of data. The following sections provide a brief overview of these data set characteristics.

Authorship

These articles represented 75 unique, first authors and 167 total, individual authors. A small number of first authors, 15 in total, had authorship on more than two articles; 30 total first authors published two

or more articles. This view of the data set helped to demonstrate the variety of authorship and the depth of communication scholars who contributed to the development of knowledge about the introductory course across the four publication outlets.

Outlets

Of the 96 articles, nearly half came from the *Basic Communication Course Annual*. However, relevant articles were published in each of the other journals every year, as well. Moreover, the number of articles published each year increased in the final 2 years of the decade, which coincides with when the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* (JCP) began publication. The *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* published 10 articles that met the inclusionary criteria in both of its first years of publication. Despite not existing for the first 8 years of the analyzed decade, we opted to add JCP as part of the data set to avoid excluding relevant data that otherwise met our overall criteria.

Article Type

In general, two types of articles—essays and research articles—were published in these journals over the course of the decade. More specifically, 86% of the articles ($n = 83$) were original research studies. Only 13 articles were coded as reflection and forum essays. The research articles used a variety of approaches from quasi-experimental studies to self-report survey studies to rhetorical analyses to content analysis of textbooks.

Study Focus

Three major areas of focus emerged within the research articles: (1) 72% ($n = 60$) focused on the student experience and outcomes ($n = 60$), (2) approximately 10% ($n = 8$) focused on faculty and administrator experiences, and (3) about 18% ($n = 15$) focused on course overview examinations. Overwhelmingly, the research articles focused primarily on student outcomes (e.g., public speaking anxiety, perception of communication competence, willingness to communicate, etc.), as well as student perceptions in the introductory course.

Subjects/Participants and Data Type

Two additional themes emerged in the analysis of the research articles. First, the types of subjects/participants included in the study fell into three categories: students as subjects/participants ($n = 62$), faculty/GTAs as participants ($n = 13$), and “other” ($n = 8$). The predominance of students as study participants aligns with the predominance of studies focused on student outcomes and experiences. Second, multiple data types were also collected for studies focused on faculty and on the course itself. However, for studies focused on student outcomes and experiences the primary type, representing 58% of data collected, was self-report information ($n = 36$) via surveys both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The remaining research articles focused on students gathered information via “mixed” data (15 articles) with some combination of student self-report information and faculty-evaluated measures (e.g. speech grades, midterm grades, attendance) or gathered information from faculty-evaluated measures alone (seven articles). Overall, the majority of articles focused on the introductory course over this decade examined student experiences and outcomes via self-report survey data.

Findings

Through the meta-synthesis process, we (1) critically explored the current focus of introductory communication course research as well as (2) identified the proposed future research avenues that scholars in this area have put forth. In the following sections, we explore these two areas of findings in detail.

Meta-Synthesis Findings: Focus of Published Research

As a first stage of the meta-synthesis process, we identified the topics of focus published in introductory communication course scholarship during the past decade (see Table 1). In the meta-synthesis, three primary subsets of article focus emerged: (1) characteristics of the students and instructors, (2) structure of the course, including delivery and framing, and (3) assessment of programs, learning outcomes, and assignments/activities.

Subset Category	Focus of the Article	Counts (Number of Articles)
Characteristics	Communication Apprehension	8
	Instructor Traits	6
	Student Traits	19
Structure	Course Approaches	15
	Instructor Training	2
	Online	6
	Speech Center	5
	State of the Course	8
Assessment	Assessment	18
	Feedback	5

Characteristics

The first primary subset of article focus in the published introductory course research centered around observable characteristics of both the students and instructors ($n = 25$). The focus of this research included demographic information as well as status traits.

Student Traits. In the published studies, students' characteristics were often a feature of the research. The demographics of students, such as their nationality (e.g., if they were an international student) and race (what one article referred to as "whiteness") were often incorporated as components of the research as ways of defining and categorizing groups for comparison. For example, studies might compare international students' outcomes to domestic students as part of the study design. The articles also examined aspects of status, such as native/non-native or multilingual speakers, dual enrollment status, or veteran status. Two additional key student characteristics that emerged through the meta-synthesis were examinations of students' self-efficacy as well as growth mindset.

Another often studied trait was communication apprehension, with eight additional articles attempting to uncover student characteristics that contribute to or mitigate feelings of communication apprehension.

Across these studies, communication apprehension was consistently examined in combination with other student traits. For example, studies examined whether communication apprehension was higher in particular groups of students based on specific demographic characteristics.

Finally, a number of studies discussed whether students had high or low self-efficacy or if students had adopted a growth mindset mentality and how these student traits might relate to communication centers/speech centers. Often, this research advocated for student-accessible resources such as university speech centers.

Instructor Traits. In addition to articles focused on student traits, an additional six articles honed in on characteristics of instructors teaching the introductory communication course. These articles centered on prosocial behaviors such as teacher immediacy, credibility, humor, and self-disclosure. The meta-synthesis also illuminated less of a concentration on demographics related to instructors but did touch on the power-laden tensions that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) often manage in the dual roles they enact in academe.

Course Structure

The secondary primary subset of topics of focus for introductory course scholars was a focus on the structure of the course ($n = 21$). This topic included examinations of course delivery (e.g., online, in-person, hybrid) as well as frames applied to the class (e.g., service-learning, learning communities).

Delivery. Within the examined articles, a focus emerged concerning what constitutes the “best” or “most effective” means for delivering the introductory course. Several of the articles ($n = 6$) specifically examined the course delivery method—online only, using a hybrid format, or traditional in-person context—and drew implications/best practices based on these forms of delivery.

Frames. Similarly, the framing of introductory communication course as service-learning or learning communities also emerged as a sub-area of research ($n = 21$). This research ranged from taking an applied perspective (e.g., asking “big questions”) to using a rhetorical lens to design the course. In addition, the efficacy of specialized sections and/or learning communities was prevalent. For example, one article compared an engineering focused section of the introductory course to a traditional, general one. Overall, the articles focused on the structure of the course including format (e.g., online vs. virtual) and framing (e.g., civic engagement, honors sections).

Assessment

The final subset of topics of focus in the introductory communication course research was a broad focus on assessment ($n = 18$). This research ranged from large programmatic assessments (e.g., core competencies), to learning outcomes assessments (e.g., engagement and learning) and assignment-level assessments (e.g., the effectiveness of using video to improve competency). For example, LeBlanc and colleagues (2011) used a pre-test post-test methodology to gauge the improvements made in primary learning outcomes, including communication knowledge, conflict management, and intercultural communication skills.

Learning outcomes assessments at the course level and assignment levels were also key subtopics that emerged from the assessment line of research. For instance, Westwick and his colleagues (2019) examined how students’ reported levels of anxiety and communication competence changed in an honors version

of the introductory course. At the assignment level, LeFebvre and his co-authors (2016) assessed the use of video recordings to complete a self-assessment and, in doing so, connected the activity to speaking competency outcomes. Overall, in this context, assessment was a consistent and popular area of focus within the research.

Meta-Synthesis Findings: Future Research Directions

The second area of analysis guiding this meta-synthesis examined the proposed future research directions across the data set articles. In choosing to analyze the discussions of future research in these articles, our aim was to determine what overarching future areas of study were proposed in the published scholarship. The suggestions included in future research discussions could serve as a map of where scholars could focus future efforts. The agendas put forth across the articles were predominately focused on “replication.” Overall, a clear majority of the articles ($n = 67$) used a quantitative methodology and their proposals of future research focused on replication of these same methods. It is worth noting that only 20 research articles used another form of inquiry (e.g., qualitative, rhetorical analysis).

In addition to advocating for replication of studies, scholars also highlighted the need for longitudinal data as well as performance data to supplement the overrepresentation of student self-report measures. For example, numerous articles advocated for the inclusion of faculty-evaluated measures such as the Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form (see Morreale et al., 2007) or the Oral Communication Assessment Rubric (see Avanzino, 2010) in combination with students’ own impressions of their work.

When viewed holistically, the arguments for future research directions, by focusing primarily on replication, did not include discussion of a breadth of methodological perspectives that could garner new insights. Thus, a missing valuable component in the future research directions analyzed through this meta-synthesis was an expansion of topics to serve as future research foci. While we had anticipated potential discussion of future possibilities moving beyond the foci of the included studies, for example suggestions of future work that could better account for the changing nature of higher education, the academy, contingent work (e.g., adjuncts) and the student population, these were not the foci that were uncovered in the meta-synthesis.

Discussion

Through this meta-synthesis of the past decade of introductory communication course research, we identified research foci/topics of articles across the decade, as well as synthesized future research directions. This project supports the extension of the front porch metaphor by highlighting introductory communication research in ways that “add curb appeal” and invite students, instructors, and administrators from across the communication discipline to examine introductory course scholarship (Beebe, 2013, p. 22).

Conclusions and Implications

First, the meta-synthesis revealed a core group of authors who regularly publish this type of work along with other scholars who infrequently research the introductory course. As such, this project emphasizes the need for increased participation in introductory course research through the acceptance of more topically and methodologically diverse research. The implementation of this endeavor would make the “front porch” more inviting and can take several forms. One such avenue for this expansion is urging

scholars and introductory course outlets to apply introductory course research to other areas and fields. Often, scholars are exposed to academic outlets (e.g., conferences, divisions, journals) when they see possible overlaps with their areas of expertise and when they work with and/or are mentored by others who have presented/published in different outlets. By urging the application of introductory course research onto broader areas, we may see a broadening and diversification of the array of scholars submitting to introductory course outlets as a result.

Second, and related to the previous point, our work uncovered a high level of insularity in terms of topics published about introductory course scholarship. As such, researchers in this area might be constraining themselves by focusing too much on the unique introductory course context and may need to expand this research to draw implications to instructional communication and/or communication education specifically and higher education more broadly. Although these data are important to introductory course directors, as well as to departmental/college administrators, scholars should also consider how it matters to those whose work is related to introductory course scholarship (e.g., communication education or instructional communication; see Morreale et al., 2017) as well as to other academic disciplines and campus constituencies. By focusing on introductory course research without connections to other communication constituents, the contributions that this scholarship makes become sequestered. For instance, the future research that takes place in the introductory course could uncover best practices for creating an active approach to teaching and learning in virtual settings, it could document shifting needs for instructor training, and could explicate nuances in terms of communication apprehension felt during online classroom interactions (e.g., breakout rooms, presentations). All of these topics would be of interest to communication scholars as well as instructors and administrators who work in higher education settings.

This shift toward expansion beyond the current narrow focus would further highlight the value that the introductory course brings to the discipline and beyond and would draw the connections to other communication scholars who may not see their research fitting within the scope of the introductory course outlets. In order to expand the “front porch,” we argue that journal editors and conference program planners should create calls for papers that would help build “connections” across areas, to help counter the insularity of the sub-discipline.

Finally, given the findings of this meta-synthesis with regard to methodological focus within the articles, we advocate for a greater representation of diverse research methods used in introductory course scholarship. By deploying an array of data collection and analysis methods that builds upon the rigor of research articles from the past decade, as well as developing new measures (e.g., psychophysiological) that would be novel in this type of research, we could develop a better understanding of the teaching/learning/administering experience surrounding the introductory communication course. This shift would provide an even stronger foundation for extending these findings to teaching and learning in communication specifically and higher education contexts more generally.

Limitations and Future Research

In addition to the findings and implications of this study, there are a few limitations that should be noted to inform future research directions. For instance, we limited our meta-synthesis to specific outlets that regularly publish introductory communication course scholarship. It would be interesting to see how, if at all, this research is presented in other, more general communication journals (e.g., *Communication Studies*, *Communication Quarterly*) and journals of higher education (*Arts and Humanities in Higher*

Education, The Journal of Higher Education, Teaching in Higher Education, Journal of Teacher Education). In a similar vein, we reviewed articles from the past decade, 2010–2019. It could be useful to apply a broader scope to see how introductory course research has evolved over a longer time frame, in a multitude of outlets, potentially combining previous work providing overviews of the field with the methodological approach of this study.

In closing, the introductory course is a significant aspect of the communication discipline and informs research and teaching in higher education. We hope that through this critical and reflective meta-synthesis, scholars will continue to build on this strong foundation for research endeavors in the coming decades. By examining where we have been, where we are now, and mapping where we can go, scholars and administrators will be better equipped to navigate shifting introductory communication course terrain and continue to make important contributions to teaching and service at institutions of higher education.

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