

Identifying a Key Opportunity to Grow the Field in Business Communication

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The articles published by Chang, Park, and Cho (2018) and Jung (2018) in the inaugural issue of Business Communication Research and Practice (BCRP) perform an incredibly valuable service to all those who are currently or will in the future be interested in understanding the state of business communication teaching and research in Korea. Both articles provide well-researched, comprehensive, and — perhaps most importantly — useful information that will enable the next generation of leaders in the field to expand and enhance the impact of Korean business communication from a position of strength and optimism.

In this brief Communication, which I hope will extend the conversation, I identify the most significant shared conclusion of these two articles. I then describe how this shared conclusion - and the scholarly, field-building opportunity it highlights - aligns perfectly with a significant national need and with the discourse and resources that have recently been devoted to addressing that need. My goal is to draw attention to the synergies between ‘What business communication can do’ and ‘What Korean leaders say needs to be done’ and to sketch a potential opening for Korean business communication researchers and teachers to achieve both the student-level and national impact that all agree can and should be achieved.

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Shared Conclusion

The key shared conclusion of Chang et al. (2018) and Jung (2018) can be found towards the end of both articles:

“[Jung’s] findings are that the Korean business professionals’ way of the interpretation of workplace knowledge illustrates that there is a significant gap between academics and practitioners in Korea” (Jung, 2018).

“More emphasis on business communication in business schools is needed with lower technical skills and higher required courses in Korea. Curriculum is one of the main elements in education, and in order to achieve its goals, it needs to meet customer needs of business as well as education” (Chang, et al., 2018).

Clearly, every university in every country struggles when it comes to finding ways to decrease the gap between ‘what university graduates can do’ and ‘what the world outside academia needs done’. Even business schools, who might reasonably be expected to be expert at aligning curricular and skills outcomes with the needs of the professional world, continually fall short of the mark (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Coffelt, Baker, & Corey, 2016; Robles, 2012). There are of course many reasons for this but two important factors noted in both papers was 1) the challenge of finding qualified - but only part-time - instructors to teach business communication courses (Jung, 2018) and 2) the resulting instability of both curriculum and prestige of the field (Chang et al., 2018). The interplay of these two factors creates a vicious cycle where, because few people know about or want to teach business communication, the impact of those courses is scatter-shot and doesn’t achieve visibility to administrators, which leads to a lack of resources (full-time faculty, research support, etc) devoted to the program, which reinforces the initial situation

where few people know about or want to teach business communication. And on and on.

Because every university deals with its own unique set institutional, political, and resource constraints, every university must to some extent find its own way out of this cycle. This ‘find your own way’ dilemma is particularly hard to overcome in the absence of national direction setting an agenda for change and backing up that agenda with publicity and resources. And yet, in Korea there currently *is* such a national emphasis that sets a change agenda and backs it up with resources. This national focus on a key national need provides an opening that, although unmentioned in both Chang et al. (2018) and Jung (2018), may provide precisely the opportunity for Korean business communication researchers and educators to consider “multifaceted stakeholder needs” (Chang et al., 2018) and begin a new, more empowered era for the field.

Growing the Field by Serving a National Need

As those reading BCRP are likely to know, funding entrepreneurial activity and developing entrepreneurial spirit has been a high priority for Korean officials ever since the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (Lee, Chang, & Lim, 2005). As of the end of 2018, the central government had amassed a 12 billion dollar venture fund for new start-ups in addition to creating entrepreneurial institutes and establishing international entrepreneurship programs at universities (Guttman, 2018). Public and privately-funded startup competitions like K-STARTUP and HelloTomorrow, together with popular depictions of entrepreneurial skills and charisma (from television’s *I Too Can Be CEO* to YouTube channels hyping K beauty products to K pop competition shows), combined with historically high levels of graduate unemployment (Yonhap, 2016) have helped to fragment the ‘school to chaebol’ pipeline and make an entrepreneurial existence both more attractive and more likely for college graduates.

Despite having the highest percentage - 69% - of tertiary graduates in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016), Korean graduates report the highest levels of fear of failure, a factor that leads to the second lowest percentage of 18–34 year olds involved in early-stage entrepreneurship (Jones & Lee, 2018). The primary explanation of this gap has been an overemphasis on what is called ‘academic studies’ at the expense of ‘skill development’ that is focused on engendering skills, habits, and attitudes that will serve students well in the actually-existing, non-academic world after school (Ortmans, 2010). This over-emphasis on ‘getting the right answer’ rather than ‘preparing myself for life’ can be clearly seen in

the fact that Korea has the second-lowest (just above Japan) rate of secondary and tertiary students who agree with the statement ‘School has taught me things that could be useful in a job’ in the OECD (Lee, 2016; OECD, 2013).

Although there are important differences between the field of entrepreneurship and the field of business communication, there are obvious synergies that can be exploited by Korean business communication researchers and teachers. Studies show that the entrepreneurial spirit of Korean college students is enhanced and their fear of failure reduced after taking an entrepreneurial education course, and it seems clear that similar effects would occur for students after taking a skills-oriented, practitioner-informed business communication class (Lee et al., 2005). Jung (2018) and Chang et al. (2018) inspire us to achieve a similar impact when they describe a possible route of future development of business communication curriculum in Korea.

What Next?

Since the contribution of Jung (2018) and Chang et al. (2018) stems from the fact that they provide a rich description of the current state of the field in Korea, it makes sense to conclude this brief Communication with some possible next steps that Korean business communication researchers and teachers can take that may enhance the visibility and relevance of the field by connecting it to the current national discussions related to entrepreneurship, skills-based learning, and college graduate success.

One productive step would be to actively prioritize a ‘communication in business’ approach in both business school and non-business school business communication courses (Jung, 2018). This practical and applied framing of the purpose of a business communication course is essential for enabling students to 1) get training and exposure to real-world business communication skills and habits, while 2) enhancing students’ sense of the relevance of business communication skills and higher education more generally. The extremely high percentage of Korean students who feel like school is a waste of time suggests that a practical, up to date, project-based, and engagingly-taught business communication course would find fertile ground among today’s Korean college students.

Second, to find instructors and/or practitioner allies who can help design and enrich such a course, business communication educators should actively cultivate relationships with entrepreneurs from the local area or with government agencies responsible for enhancing entrepreneurial activity. Organizations like the Korea Entrepreneurship Foundation, Korea Federation of SMEs, and the Ministry of Startups and SMEs each have out-

reach and educational components that, if incorporated into business communication courses, could provide an easy win/win for universities, students, and for organizations that participate. Bringing entrepreneurs onto campus, having them meet/network with faculty and administrators, and getting them in front of students can be a powerful way to prove to students that core business communication topics like networking, clear speaking, persuasive pitching, and competent charisma can be key differentiators in the professional world.

Finally, it would be foolish to overlook the part that the Korean Association of Business Communication could play in publicizing the community of Korean business communication scholars and teachers as key allies in national conversation about how to shift the emphasis in Korean tertiary education from a purely academic focus to a more balanced and market-sensitive emphasis on both the knowledge and the skills that graduates will need in the fragmented and uncertain world of 21st-century employment. As Jung (2018) astutely notes, there is a clear heterogeneity between business communication academics and practitioners in Korea, but it has not been clearly enough recognized, publicized, or studied to reach the ears of key decision-makers at the departmental or university levels. KABC can be the prime platform for coordinating and increasing the awareness of that heterogeneity. From his President's Greetings (Lee, 2019), it is clear that current leadership of KABC understands and is prepared to take this next step. After all, as Prof Lee says, "Society demands more from academia."

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