

# Communication as a Practical Discipline: Engaging Theory with Practice

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Among various intellectual disciplines that populate the academy, *practical disciplines* have it as their distinct mission to cultivate particular fields of social practice. Practical disciplines arise historically in academic institutions partly in response to sociocultural trends that mark certain fields of practice as especially important and problematic. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “problems of communication” have emerged in this way in modern societies, and this trend, I believe, has formed the sociocultural basis of authority on which an academic discipline of communication is gradually being institutionalized. As I have argued elsewhere, however, “a practical discipline must be more than just practical, it must also be a discipline” (Craig, 2008, p. 19). If the sociocultural legitimacy of this academic field rests primarily on its perceived practical usefulness, its legitimacy as a discipline also rests on its institutional presence and the intellectual quality and distinctiveness of its contributions to knowledge as a research field that engages knowledge with practice. The problem of “theory and practice” is thus essential to this discipline in both its theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, the problem is to deepen our knowledge and understanding of communication in ways that have the potential to inform, or even transform, practices of communication in society. Practically, the problem is to cultivate reflexive forms of practice that apply our knowledge and understanding of communication to practical problems. Having established that the problem of engaging theory with practice is essential to communication as a practical discipline, this keynote lecture will distinguish some basic philosophical views on this problem that have emerged in Western thought from ancient to modern times, and in that light will reflect critically on more specific theoretical-methodological approaches to engaging theory with practice that currently seem to hold promise for advancing communication research. These will include approaches such as “activity theory” influenced by Russian thought traditions as well as “practical theory” approaches influenced by American pragmatism.

## Reference

Craig, R. T. (2008). Communication in the conversation of disciplines. *Russian Journal of Communication*, 1(1), 7-23. doi: 10.1080/19409419.2008.10756693