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The Rhetoric of Teaching a Crisis: Incorporating Rhetorical Pedagogy into Crisis Communications Textbooks

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Pedagogy in Crisis Communication Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

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A crisis is a pivotal moment for a company, and having prepared communicators can impact the reputation and financial state of a company. But there is currently a gap in learning how to manage a crisis and performing in the workplace. To explore this problem, I analyzed the four most popular textbooks in crisis communications and analyzed how they used theory to help students craft a fitting response to a crisis. My thesis recommends incorporating rhetorical theory, specifically the theory of the rhetorical situation, to bridge theory and practice and provide students with flexible theory to learn how to respond in a crisis.

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Introduction

Public relations students at a university are taught to be prepared to take on the challenges the industry provides, including the challenge of the corporate crisis. Crises are one of the most common, and potentially catastrophic, exigencies that many companies face, and a public relations practitioner is tasked with crafting a fitting response. The way that a crisis is handled and communicated to the public is called crisis communications. A crisis and a poor response could cost a company its reputation and lead to financial loss and a loss of public safety (Institute for PR). For example, United Airlines lost $800 million in value in a matter of hours after its 2017 crisis when a passenger was dragged off a plane, and the company responded in an unsatisfying way (Abbruzzese). Uber, after responding to a crisis where the company had ties to President Trump, lost 200,000 users (Carson). In fact, a study by *The Economist* found that of the eight most notable crises since 2010, the companies all survived, but they are all worth about 30% less in value than they were before the crisis (Ryder). On the other hand, Johnson & Johnson faced a crisis in 1982 where seven Tylenol product users were poisoned, but the company responded effectively and has seen steady growth since the crisis and has reached a networth of $443.18 billion (MarketTrends). From these past examples and more, it is evident that the way a company handles a crisis affects the consequences it faces after a crisis, including the company's overall value.

Where do public relations practitioners find the knowledge to handle these crises effectively? Crisis communications is taught in the classroom, typically in communications or public relations departments. As an undergraduate student in public relations, I learned about these crises and crisis communications. In my classes, we read textbooks, learned about case

studies, and discussed theories. I was exposed to many theories but could not see their application. While I enjoyed learning about case studies, I did not understand how to use the information in practice. Knowing what Johnson & Johnson did in 1982 was inspiring, but it did not teach me how to handle a crisis on my own. Had I gone into the field with only that instruction, I would not have felt prepared to manage a crisis successfully in new situations. According to researchers An-Sofie Claeys and Michaël Opgenhaffen, I am not the only student with this problem. These researchers studied the wide "gap between theory and practice" (3) and determined that practitioners do not apply theory they learned in school. One primary reason practitioners found that prevented theory use was workplace constraints, such as budget limitations or supervisor preferences. The authors conclude that this gap between theory and practice prevents companies from responding effectively in a crisis.

Fortunately, I was also enrolled in a professional writing and rhetoric minor, which introduced me to rhetorical theory. As I was exposed to concepts like the rhetorical situation and genre, I realized that rhetoric provided concepts and terms that helped me understand how to communicate effectively and helped me feel more prepared to engage in crisis communications. I saw rhetorical theory as a way to bridge the theory and practice. My question as an undergraduate student then and as a graduate student now is, "How can rhetorical theory be used in crisis communications pedagogy?" That question is what led me to study the relationship between crisis communications and rhetorical theory in pedagogy. To pursue this question, I designed this Master's thesis to help me answer three research questions: (1) What is the status of rhetorical theory in crisis communications pedagogy? 2) Can rhetorical theory be used to improve crisis communications pedagogy? And 3) If so, how?

To answer these questions, I conducted a content analysis of four popular crisis communications textbooks: *Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2010), compiled by Timothy Coombs; *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach* (2016), by Kathleen Banks-Fearn; *Crisis Communications Strategies: How to Prepare in Advance, Respond Effectively and Recover in Full* (2020), by Amanda Coleman; and *Crisis Communications: The Definitive Guide to Managing the Message* (2013), by Stephen Fink. I selected these textbooks because they are the most popular crisis communications textbooks by number of purchases on both Amazon and Chegg. These four textbooks also represent varied approaches to incorporating theory and practice in crisis communications pedagogy. I assessed the state of communication theory (of which rhetorical theory is a subset), identified key rhetorical concepts that could be beneficial, and outlined how they could be used to improve crisis communications pedagogy. I also revised portions of the textbooks to improve the use of rhetorical theory.

Because rhetoric was influential in my understanding of crisis communications and will be important to this thesis, I will adopt Jim Kuypers definition of rhetoric as "the strategic use of communication… to achieve specifiable goals" (10). This definition aligns with a classical understanding of rhetoric, which emphasizes "the public, persuasive, and contextual characteristics of human discourse in situations governed by the problems of contingency" (Porrovecchio & Condit 2). This understanding can provide an expansive and relevant theory for crisis communications scholarship and pedagogy. Twentieth-century rhetoricians in communication studies have theorized and adapted classical rhetoric for contemporary communication situations. Most notably among these is Bitzer, whose articulation of the rhetorical situation had a profound impact on the scholarship and teaching of rhetoric in both English and communication departments. Contemporary theories of classical rhetoric can align

with the goals of crisis communications as a field and provide students with applicable principles and tools in a variety of situations.

Adding usable theory to crisis communications pedagogy is something discussed in recent communication scholarship because the field is looking to improve students' abilities as theorists. J. Kevin Barge in the *Communication Education* journal highlights the importance of theory in communication classrooms, saying, "Communication theory also occupies a central position in our undergraduate pedagogy." Barge argues that for students to become effective practitioners, they need to first learn to be theorists. To do that, theory must take a central place in the classroom and be something students actively work with and create themselves. Learning about theory is central for a reason. Knowing what theory is used in practice helps students better understand and implement theory. My experience learning about rhetorical theory confirms Barge's argument: It is important for teachers, scholars, and practitioners to to understand this relationship between theory and pedagogy. My project aims to provide an approach that helps students use theory to become more effective practitioners, like Barge discusses, by implementing rhetorical theory.

Overall, I discovered that the status of rhetorical theory in crisis communications pedagogy is primarily linked to the rhetorical concept of apologia. In general, theory in these textbooks is either discussed explicitly but separately from practice or implied in discussions of practice, and rhetorical theory is explicitly mentioned only in the limited capacity of apologia. I argue that a more comprehensive and in-depth approach to rhetorical theory can improve crisis communications pedagogy because it provides a way to connect theory and practice, making pedagogy more useful for students in the classroom. In this thesis, I first look at the status of rhetorical theory in crisis communications scholarship. Then I explore the status of theory, both

communication and rhetorical, in the four textbooks. Finally, I explain how rhetorical theory can benefit crisis communications pedagogy and provide revised textbook selections to illustrate one way rhetorical theory could be incorporated into crisis communications pedagogy.

Rhetorical Theory in Crisis Communications Scholarship

Crisis communications is a rhetorical act, drawing from the ancient tradition of apologia. Aristotle wrote that there is a type of speech that is "accusatory or defensive; for litigants must necessarily either accuse or defend," (1.3.3) and that this is apologia. Essentially, Aristotle explains that when someone is accused of an offensive act, the way they respond in defense is apologia, something demonstrated in Plato's *Apology*. From these ancient roots, scholars have connected this ancient concept with corporate crisis communications. In 1973, Ware and Linkugel wrote a seminal piece on apologia as a rhetorical act (274). These scholars define four strategies of apologia—denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence—to illustrate its genre conventions. This article opened the contemporary discussion of apologia.

Building from Ware and Linkugel, Hearit then connects the genre of apologia with crisis communications. Specifically, he explains the idea of corporate apologia and equates it with crisis communications. Hearit's 1995 article has allowed scholars to discuss crisis communications as a form of apologia, or a subgenre of what Ware and Linkugel discussed. Similarly, Benoit expanded crisis communications to include the idea of image restoration theory as a form of rhetoric (178). According to Benoit, not only is the act of repairing an image the right way to respond in a crisis, but it is also a "form of persuasive discourse" (183). Coombs continued to expand crisis communications by including more data-driven methods, such as using statistical analysis to determine effectiveness of responses. Within the last five years,

scholars like Sohn and Edwards continue to discuss the concept of corporate apologia and crisis communications as a rhetorical act. In their interdisciplinary approach, Sohn and Edwards add a psychological perspective and the concept of corporate ambiguity. These researchers added psychology theory to research on corporate apologia to create the idea of corporate ambiguity, defined as companies deliberately allowing for misinterpretation to reduce blame. In 2022, Wang, et al. published on continuing developments in crisis communications, indicating a continuing scholarly conversation on crisis communications and rhetoric.

This review of scholarship indicates that crisis communications and rhetoric are connected, but it has been primarily limited to apologia. Communication research demonstrates that apologia is a useful tool for theorizing image restoration and conceptualizing crisis communications as a genre. However, apologia is only one aspect of rhetorical theory that, I argue, is not the most current or applicable theory for crisis communications pedagogy. In contrast, contemporary rhetorical theory constitutes a more flexible, relevant, and effective pedagogical theory for helping students learn how to craft fitting responses to a crisis.

Rhetorical Theory in Crisis Communications Textbooks

To answer my first research question, I began exploring the status of theory in crisis communications textbooks. I selected four popular textbooks to analyze. I marked every use of theory (used explicitly or implicitly) in the four textbooks. I then named two categories that naturally emerged: those that primarily use theory explicitly (Coombs and Fearn-Banks) and those that primarily use theory implicitly (Coleman and Fink). I refer to these as theory-explicit textbooks and theory-implicit textbooks. Theory-explicit textbooks mention the name of the theory when its concepts are discussed. Theory-implicit textbooks do not mention the name of

the theory but discuss its concepts. For example, a theory-explicit textbook will mention crisis management concepts and refer to Crisis Management Theory while a theory-implicit textbook will mention the steps of crisis management without referring to it as Crisis Management Theory. These labels are merely a way to discuss what I noticed in each of the textbooks and provide terminology to discuss two different approaches to theory use in the textbooks that are worth exploring.

I first explore the status of communication theory in the four crisis communications textbooks. For the purposes of this study, I draw on Robert Craig's definition of communication theory as any type of theory that offers "distinct ways of conceptualizing and discussing communication problems and practices" (120). This definition is appropriate because it is broad enough to contain any type of communication theory, yet it remains focused on ideas that influence and affect practice. Because I treat rhetorical theory as a subset of communication theory, I first identified how any communication theory is used within the textbooks by coding for all mentions of theory and then evaluated how theory was used, using on the labels theory-explicit and theory-implicit.

In the theory-explicit textbooks, the communication theories are nearly always mentioned by name. For example, Coombs names nine different theories. Coombs describes the theories in segments like this one: "Attribution theory is a social-psychological theory that attempts to explain how people make sense of events" (Coombs 37). The theory is not present in the chapters discussing practice or case studies. Similarly, Fearn-Banks's textbook has a separate chapter where she names five theories. She describes communication theory similarly to Coombs: "Decision theory is concerned with counseling management and other leaders to make the most effective decision. Decision theory may be applied to all areas of management" (Fearn-

Banks 20). Both authors separate theory from the rest of the textbook, refer to a large variety of

theory, and discuss theories descriptively. Ultimately, these textbooks are theoretically-based,

which helps provide grounding, but the theory is disconnected from practice.

Although implicit-theory books generally name no communication theories, theoretical

principles are still present. Both Coleman and Fink use crisis management theory, though it is

never presented as theory. Coleman also uses the anticipatory model implicitly. Both Coleman

and Fink use theory implicitly, as in this example: "Crisis management deals with the reality of

the crisis. It is the actual management of the precarious situation that is rapidly unfolding. It is

making swift and vigilant decisions, gathering resources, marshaling troops, and so on,

sometimes under great stress and enormous time constraints, to resolve a pressing problem"

(Fink 8). In this example, crisis management theory is translated into practice. The authors use

theory as a framework for practice, meaning they draw on the theory to describe practices, but

they do so implicitly. Theory informs practice, but it is not made visible, which makes it less

transferable to different situations.

I performed an additional round of coding specifically looking at rhetorical theory.

Rhetorical theory, defined above as "the strategic use of communication" (Kuypers 10), is both

explicitly and implicitly discussed in these four textbooks. For my analysis of rhetorical theory, I

looked for any use of a rhetorical term (such as "apologia") or any term that could be used

rhetorically, meaning that a concept was used to reflect a dynamic, contextualized understanding

of communication, such as "situation," "audience," and "message" (see Porrovecchio and

Condit). For example, when a textbook used the term "public" to characterize audience, that use

was considered rhetorical, even though the term "audience" was not used because the context

indicated an understanding of a public as a dynamic audience-speaker interaction as opposed to a

transmission model. I marked each instance of any type of rhetorical theory or principle and evaluated whether it was used explicitly or implicitly.

All four textbooks use terms rhetorically, either explicitly or implicitly. The two theory-explicit textbooks use the term "rhetorical theory," but the most prevalent term used explicitly in these two textbooks is "apologia." Both textbooks include a section on apologia theory: Fearn-Banks references apologia in a subsection in her theory chapter and says, "When an organization has been accused of a misdeed, its reaction to its publics is often called apologia. It is, as one would assume, an effort to defend reputation and protect image" (17); and Coombs discusses apologia briefly in his theory chapter and says, "Apologia is a rhetorical concept that explores the use of communication for self-defense" (30). Both authors also use rhetorical terms, primarily "situation," throughout the texts when describing crisis situations but are not included in the theory section on apologia.

Similarly, the theory-implicit textbooks use terminology rhetorically but do not label it as theory. For example, Fink writes, "Wendy's should have quickly analyzed the entire situation and said, let the cops do what they do best, and let us do what we do best. The company's responsibility was clear: cooperate with law enforcement, but take care of its customers, its business, and its bottom line" (Fink 38). In this selection, Fink is analyzing a response the company Wendy's put out, and he uses the terms "analyzed the entire situation" in a way that implies a dynamic awareness of the situation. Because Fink does not label this as rhetorical theory, his analysis comes across as an opinion rather than an instance of applying rhetorical theory to practice. Coleman provides another valuable example of this implicit rhetorical theory. She writes, "Remembering the people involved and those affected, and using this to improve your actions, means a greater possibility of developing an effective crisis communications

response" (Coleman 77). Again, like Fink, Coleman's textbook primarily provides advice to practitioners, and she is advising readers to remember the audience and to use that to influence their communication. Audience is a concept based in rhetorical theory but Coleman does not call it rhetorical theory.

How Rhetorical Theory Can Improve Crisis Communications Pedagogy

While the theory-explicit and theory-implicit labels were primarily descriptive, they also help highlight two pedagogical problems present in all four textbooks. For that reason, I will discuss the two problems in terms of explicit and implicit theory. The theory-explicit textbooks pose a pedagogical problem: they include an overwhelming number of communication theories, and they present those theories separate from practice. With theory being put in its own section of the textbook, reading these sections can feel like reading a dictionary of communication theory, with a theory mentioned and followed by a few paragraphs of definitional work before moving to the next. So while students get exposure to theory, they are not shown how to utilize that theory in practice. The theory-implicit textbooks pose a related pedagogical problem. Implicitly framing practice with theory obscures theory by using it as anecdote. So while students see how to use concepts, they are not able to see those as generalizable principles that can be applied to other cases.

Rhetorical theory can bridge the gap between theory and practice in the theory-explicit textbooks. In my own experience as a student, the biggest benefit I found to learning about rhetorical theory was the way rhetoric helped me conceptualize communication. It helped me see the complexities of real-life communications and gave me tools that were equipped to understand and to imagine how I could intervene effectively in those situations. In particular, the concept of

the rhetorical situation helped me see crisis as a complex, dynamic situation requiring excellent timing and appropriate use of genres to engage audiences rather than a linear transmission of messages after a crisis occurred. Conceptualizing a crisis as complex and dynamic is connecting theory and practice. Rhetorical theory is equipped to link theory and practice because it is a theory of communications that highlights the real complexities and impacts for speakers and audiences.

In addition, using rhetorical theory explicitly helps to remove obscurity between theory and practice in the theory-implicit textbooks. Using rhetorical terms as a part of explicit rhetorical theory provides students with the terminology they need to conceptualize communications and apply theory. Teaching communications students rhetorical terms can help them understand what they are working in and help them use communications theory to respond appropriately. Overall, the addition of rhetorical theory is both a solution to the problems in all four textbooks and a natural extension of what they are currently doing.

Implementing the Rhetorical Situation in Crisis Communications Pedagogy

To answer my third research question, I provide one suggestion of what incorporating concepts from rhetorical theory into crisis communications pedagogy could look like. This section resembles Jackson's description of using "rhetorical theory as pedagogy" and similarly relies on "threshold concepts" (Jackson 29). Jan Meyer and Ray Land introduced the idea of threshold concepts as "opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" in a way that enhances learning (1). Like Jackson, I selected a threshold concept to help crisis communications students begin to think rhetorically and to provide them with terminology to discuss crafting a fitting response to a crisis. The threshold concept I see as

particularly useful for crisis communications students is the rhetorical situation. While there are many valuable rhetorical concepts, I selected the rhetorical situation both because it was essential to my own experience and because it provides a framework students can use to understand nuanced scenarios with many factors to consider before communicating. Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" outlined several key facets of the rhetorical situation that provide helpful terminology for students and practitioners to discuss crisis communications from a rhetorical perspective.

Bitzer's explanation, published in 1968, has been debated and expanded in contemporary rhetorical scholarship. Five years after Bitzer's publication, Richard E. Vatz wrote "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation" where he critiqued Bitzer's concept of exigence in the rhetorical situation. Bitzer conceptualizes exigencies as something that exist independent of a rhetor. Bitzer writes, "In any sort of context, there will be numerous exigencies… Rhetors encounter exigencies… In any rhetorical situation there will be at least one controlling exigence" (6–7). For Bitzer, communicators enter exigencies to respond to. Vatz argued that exigencies are created by the rhetor when they communicate, and "the event is imbued with salience" (157). So for Vatz, exigencies cannot exist independently for communicators to work in. While Vatz raises a necessary argument, exigencies do exist in crisis communications. Bitzer writes, "Rhetorical discourse is called into existence by situation" (9). While this idea may not be true in all rhetoric, it is for a crisis because a response is called into existence by the crisis. Viewing exigence through Bitzer's model is beneficial for crisis communications students.

Another critique of Bitzer's model comes from Barbara Biesecker. Biesecker finds that models of the rhetorical situation treat the concept of audience as something that is apparent and obvious, with the audience being "a conglomeration of subjects whose identity is fixed prior to

the rhetorical event itself" (111). Her critique of audience as something apparent and pre-existing

in a rhetorical situation is helpful, but I have chosen to work with Bitzer's conceptualization

because it provides a basic understanding of thinking about audience for students who may be

unfamiliar with doing so. This same logic is why I also use Bitzer's model of the rhetorical

situation over Jenny Edbauer's rhetorical ecologies. Rhetorical ecologies provide a

comprehensive idea of how rhetoric moves through real contexts and evolves. The concept of

rhetorical ecologies is beneficial to understand, but it is more beneficial for students who are

already familiar with the rhetorical situation model. Because the students who would benefit

most from my project have little to no rhetorical education, it would be more beneficial for them

to begin with Bitzer's model of the rhetorical situation as a threshold concept to conceptualize

crisis communications. It could be beneficial in the future to create an additional course or

textbook to build on Bitzer and orient students to Biesecker's and Edbauer's ideas.

Below, I explain Bitzer's model of the rhetorical situation and each of the constituents to

provide one model threshold concept that could be beneficial to incorporate into crisis

communications pedagogy. Bitzer defines the rhetorical situation as "a complex of persons,

events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely

or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision

or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence" (19–20). The rhetorical

situation is a complex web of the people, events, objects, and other factors a communicator must

consider to create a "fitting response" (10). Bitzer outlines key constituents, and each constituent

can be a sub-concept to consider incorporating into crisis communications pedagogy.

Audience

Not every type of communication is rhetorical, but all "rhetoric requires an audience" (7). Kenneth Burke in *Rhetoric of Motives* expresses a similar idea that human discourse is always toward an audience. The audience within the rhetorical situation is "only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (Bitzer 8). So for practitioners in crisis communications, it is important to understand what groups are able to be influenced by a crisis response and to communicate intentionally with those groups. While Biesecker notes that the audience may not always be easily apparent, it is more important to have students begin considering who is important to communicate with in the moment of a crisis.

Speaker/Purpose

Communication has a speaker (often referred to as the "rhetor") of some kind, though the speaker is not always the most important part of the rhetorical situation. For practitioners, it is also worth noting that the speaker could be considered the organization as a whole, rather than an individual. The speaker "creates rhetorical discourse" (Bitzer 1) and interacts with the audience. The rhetor in a rhetorical situation will have a purpose for communicating. For a crisis communications practitioner, the purpose is often to protect the company and reduce consequences.

Exigence

Exigence is the most debated constituent of Bitzer's model. The exigence is "an imperfection marked by urgency… a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done" (6). For crisis communications practitioners, the exigence is always the crisis itself. When a crisis happens, they are now responsible for communicating within that exigence and responding appropriately. While scholars like Vatz view exigence differently, Bitzer's model aligns with the way practitioners need to respond.

Constraints

Constraints are "persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (8). Constraints are important for practitioners to consider because every crisis in which they communicate will have constraints, including requirements from management, legal limitations, or budgets. In An-Sofie Claeys and Michaël Opgenhaffen's research, they determined that workplace constraints are a major factor in creating gaps between classroom learning and real-life application. So helping students understand the constraints in their situations and how to navigate them is important in learning to be an effective practitioner.

Kairos

Kairos is the concept of the timeliness of a response. Bruce E. Gronbeck describes timing as "a product of the interaction among other communication variables. 'Proper' rhetorical timing

requires that strategic decisions be made on each variable; if those decisions are made well, kairos—the right message at the right time and place— will be achieved." Timing is communicating when it is the right opportunity for an audience and message. In a crisis, timeliness is key. If practitioners take too long to respond, it sends a message to the audience.

What Does Rhetorical Theory Look Like in Practice?

I revised small segments of each of the four textbooks to show one way rhetorical theory could be incorporated into the crisis communications classroom and a visualization of what rhetorical theory looks like. To revise these sections, I took one chapter of each textbook and added a section that incorporates the threshold concept I selected: the rhetorical situation. Below are the segments I added, as well as justification for each section and what the revisions accomplish.

1. Explanation and Justification of the Revised Fink Textbook Section

I selected a case study on Toyota from the textbook to revise. The description of Toyota's crisis is poignant and relevant to students' understanding and should remain the same. It is at the end of the chapter where students could benefit most from the addition of rhetorical theory, specifically the rhetorical situation. This new addition to the textbook helps students stop and think about the case study they read in a rhetorical lens. I chose to focus on the concept of audience (which is a part of Bitzer's rhetorical situation) since that was the underlying issue in Toyota's response. Focusing on audience allows students to see the problem at hand in a way they now understand (when paired in conjunction with the brief overview of audience in rhetorical theory) and begin thinking about how they might consider the audience in future

communication and crisis responses. Below is the section I would include, so students can see the Toyota crisis analyzed rhetorically and in a way they can do so for future situations. This revision picks up on page 34 of the textbook. My revisions are in italicized text.

Revised Fink Textbook Section

Toyota seemed to be forever playing defense. It was never able to (1) pinpoint the source of the problems or (2) offer remedies. And you may as well know now that there are crises for which there are no quick panaceas, but your customers and the government are demanding just that. In such instances, you need to take the public into your confidence and report on the tests you've conducted, all of which have so far failed to reach a conclusion. Explain what you are trying so as to at least give the public a fighting chance to get on your side by showing people how diligently you're working to try to solve the problem. If the public has the impression that you're trying to help, that's half the battle. In Toyota's case, the perception was that whatever the source of the troubles, the company had known for some years that it had a series of major problems—and never reported them. To anyone. *The main problem here is that Toyota was not considering its audience. Its audience demanded transparency and updates on the problems at hand, but Toyota did not consider the needs of its audience, which resulted in an ineffective crisis communication strategy. Think back to the theory of the rhetorical situation and how audience is a key part of that. As Bitzer explained, an audience is the people who can do something about a situation. Toyota failed to communicate properly with the people who could do what the company needed, which led to its crisis communications failure. Good communicators consider their audience, and failing to consider every aspect of the rhetorical situation limits the effectiveness of communication.* .

Think about it rhetorically:

- *Why was it problematic to fail to respond to the audience?*

- *What could Toyota have done to consider its audience and respond to the rhetorical situation at hand effectively?*

- *How can you consider your audience when you are faced with a situation?*

- *How did Toyota consider other elements of the rhetorical situation? Was its response timely? Did it address the constraints appropriately?*

2. Explanation of Revised Coleman Textbook Section

Coleman follows a similar path to Fink. For this revision, I chose a selection that already had some basis in rhetorical theory since it discusses messaging. The changes I made to this section help emphasize broader principles of the rhetorical situation that will be applicable no matter the current type of technology. This revision has students think about the rhetorical situation they could be working in. Coleman's guidance in the chapter gets very specific, but it is almost too specific to be universal, so this more general introduction to messaging within the rhetorical situation will help students see the big picture. The hypothetical scenario is to show students where the rhetorical situation might crop up and how they could begin thinking it through. My revisions for the Coleman section begin on page 90 of the textbook. All of the text below is my revisions (none of it is Coleman's original text).

__Revised Coleman Textbook Revision__

Messaging is about communicating the ideas your company would like to communicate in a way that will reach your audience and hopefully resonate with them. Creating the "right" message begins by analyzing the rhetorical situation you find yourself in. The rhetorical situation is a model that can help you visualize all the people and factors involved in your crisis, including what message you should send and to whom. Who are you communicating with? What modes of communication do they use? What mediums could you use to reach them effectively? What else is happening around your company or about the topic you're communicating about? Could that affect how your audience perceives your message? What constraints are you working in? Communicators since ancient times (like Aristotle) have used similar concepts to determine what the right message for an audience could be and how it should be communicated.

Let's consider this scenario. You are in charge of communicating with all the internal employees at your company about a crisis your company is facing. Your audience is the employees you're working with. Does everyone need all of the details on the crisis, or would a more general approach be appropriate? In this scenario, we will say that you primarily need to alert employees that there has been an incident, but you don't need to give details since many are classified to upper management only. You consider how you can communicate this message. If you held an in-person briefing, would that incite more panic, or would it be the most efficient way to alert everyone? If you send out an email or other form of messaging, you could run the risk that employees won't read it or that the briefing could be forwarded or spread further than you want. How soon should you alert people who need to know? Timeliness (often called kairos) matters in these situations. These are the kinds of questions to consider when crafting a message in order to reach your audience with the message you want in the most effective way possible.

3. <u>Explanation and Justification of Revised Coombs Textbook Section</u>

Overall, for the Coombs textbook, it would be better to include theory more throughout the text instead of just heavily upfront. I would include more rhetorical theory in the case studies. Currently, the case studies provide an engaging description of the crisis, but they have little to no analysis at the conclusion. The goal of this revision is to have students think rhetorically after reading a case study by incorporating the threshold concept of the rhetorical situation. A case study without analysis leaves students without guidance as to what they can do with their new knowledge on a company's past experience. This addition of rhetorical theory as pedagogy brings theory back into later portions of the textbook, and it helps bridge the gap between practice and theory for students. This revision revises the content on page 500 of the textbook in a case study about the Swedish Migrant Board. Starting on page 500, I would add this selection. All of the text below is in my words, and none of it is in the original author's.

Revised Coombs Textbook Section

None of these accusations are dealt with in the communication by Janna Valik or other management staff. This response fails to adhere to the rhetorical concept of apologia, but it does more than that. Failing to address the accusations is a deeper failure: the communicators failed to address the needs of their audience and to address the rhetorical situation. As Kenneth Burke explained, human communication is always directed to an audience, so effective communication is impossible without considering that audience and what they need. Lloyd Bitzer explains in his theory of the rhetorical situation that all effective communication is audience-oriented. The Swedish Migrant Board not only failed to appropriately utilize the genre of apologia, they failed to truly communicate because they never really directed their communication toward an

audience other than themselves, which wasn't an effective response to their rhetorical situation. As a result, their crisis communications strategy failed to bring the results they wanted. If communicators fail to consider their audience, they are not properly communicating, and the communication they put out into the world will not land properly.

Consider how you communicate with audiences. Do you consider your audience before you communicate? How could the Swedish Migrant Board have communicated differently? What is a way to consider the audience and communicate in this situation?

4. <u>Explanation and Justification of Revised Fearn-Banks Textbook Section</u>

Fearn-Banks could also benefit from referencing theory more throughout the textbook and not just in a disjointed chapter. Fearn-Banks is the only textbook author who has an analysis section already at the end of case studies. She adds a section about what could have been done if social media had existed during this crisis response. The problem with this current analysis section is that social media is a narrow lens to analyze through. Social media is a relatively recent factor in crisis communications, and it is not necessarily a stable addition. Social media will shift and change in the coming years, and if we only prepare students to respond with current social media technologies, it is limiting. Shifting the analysis section to be rhetorical adds a universal lens that students could then use in a wide variety of situations and with ever-changing technologies.

This revision would be added at the end of one of the chapters on page 74 and replace the current section at the end. Currently, there is a section at the end of each textbook, and this would go in place of it. All text below is mine.

Revised Fearn-Banks Textbook Section

      What would happen if we considered this scenario rhetorically? How did Johnson & Johnson respond to the rhetorical situation they were working in? Consider these questions:

- *What elements of Bitzer's model of the rhetorical situation are present in this case study?*

- *How did Johnson & Johnson consider its audience?*

    - *Who was the audience in this situation?*

- *What was Johnson & Johnson's purpose with communicating?*

- *What communication channels did Johnson & Johnson choose to work with?*

    - *Which channels were effective?*

        - *Did it work to use a hotline? Why?*

- *How did Johnson & Johnson use timing to its advantage?*

    - *Johnson & Johnson responded within hours and provided a product solution within days. Why was a quick response effective in this situation?*

- *What constraints did Johnson & Johnson face?*

    - *How did it respond to the constraints?*

Once you consider how Johnson & Johnson used the rhetorical situation to its advantage, how can you apply these same concepts to your own practice?

Implications

      One of the implications for adding rhetorical theory is that there is potential to benefit student transfer. There is little point in pedagogy that students cannot take and apply in future contexts. In Taczak and Robertson's research on key terms in writing courses and transfer, they say, "Key terms provide a conceptual foundation for writing knowledge developed in the course,

guiding the assigned readings, class activities, and major assignments, and serving as a focal point for students' reflective work throughout the course" (43). Key terms allow students to build theory in new, unfamiliar situations. The approach to crisis communications pedagogy outlined in this project also uses key terms for rhetorical theory, which could also provide students with vocabulary and theory-building tools. This concept worked to improve transfer in writing studies and could do so as well in crisis communications pedagogy. My project does not delve into how transfer could occur, but it provides an opening for research on how rhetorical theory could bridge the gap between theory and practice that An-Sofie Claeys and Michaël Opgenhaffen discussed. In doing so, implementing rhetorical theory could add a stronger focus on theory in communications pedagogy as Barge calls for.

Looking at rhetorical theory in crisis communications pedagogy also provides an opening for more crisis communications research. Currently, the research focuses on apologia only. Rhetorical theory has many more facets that could be explored in the field, and this project only addresses one. Future researchers could explore audience, rhetorical situation, genre, and other rhetorical concepts in practice to further crisis communications research. For example, in Sohn and Edward's project, they explore strategic ambiguity by looking at apologia. If they were to expand what facets of rhetorical theory they explored, they could create a bigger picture of what strategic ambiguity looks like in practice, something that more scholarship on apologia could benefit from.

Conclusion

Crisis communications is an impactful field. Crises come to nearly every company in some form, and improperly managed crises can result in the loss of customers, reputation, and

finances. Teaching students how to be effective practitioners is important to help companies and other organizations as well as individuals thrive and maintain reputations. Currently, there is a focus on practice, and this focus is beneficial. Students need to know how to handle a crisis. But if my own undergraduate experience is any indication, there is only so far that approach can go. If I had been expected to respond to a crisis just after graduation, I would not have known where to begin. Learning about rhetorical theory and conceptualizing communications that way then helped me to feel more confident with practice. Using these revisions and the addition of rhetorical theory to crisis communications should help students feel that they have a better understanding of how to respond and how to communicate effectively. They should have a better understanding of what theory is available to help them and how to apply that to practice. Ultimately, adding rhetorical theory to crisis communications can help students become practitioners.

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Appendix A: State of Communication Theory in Crisis Communication Textbooks

Code	Explanation	Examples
Explicit communicati-on theory	Explicit communications theory will mention a concept and refer to it as a theory. The requirements are: • Uses word *theory* or similar words like *model* or *research* • Refers to theoretical concepts	• "SCCT [situation crisis communication theory] translated attribution theory into the language of crisis communications as a base for the theory" (Coombs 24). • "Contingency theory was developed… the idea is that it could be applied to any aspect of public relations. Researchers have begun to develop contingency theory's utility to explaining crisis communications and testing propositions related to crisis communications" (Coombs 24). • "Management research focused more on crisis management itself and viewed crisis communications as a variable in the process" (Coombs 23). • "The anticipatory model of crisis management is among the limited research in this area. Prevention is the top priority for the anticipatory model" (Coombs 25). • "EPPM [extended parallel process model] provides a way to understand how people will respond to risk messages" (Coombs 27). • "IRT begins with an attack that threatens a reputation. An attack has two components…" (Coombs 31). • "Attribution theory is a social-psychological theory that attempts to explain how people make sense of events…" (Coombs 37).

		• "[IRT] is threatening reputation or image and also determines which publics must be addressed and persuaded in order to maintain and restore positive image" (Fearn-Banks 19). • "Decision theory is concerned with counseling management and other leaders to make the most effective decision. Decision theory may be applied to all areas of management, but it is useful in public relations management and crisis communications. The theory is especially applicable to issues management and the effort to prevent a crisis" (Fearn-Banks 20).

Implicit communication theory	Implicit theory will refer to theoretical concepts or models but without using words like *theory*, *model*, or *research*. The requirements are
	
	  • Uses theoretical concepts
	
	  • Does not mention *theory*
		• "There are five elements that need to be in place to make the critical incident or issue into a full-blown crisis. First, this is a time of intense difficulty or at the worst extreme danger" (Coleman 27).
		
		• "A crisis is a fluid and dynamic state of affairs containing equal parts danger and opportunity. It is a turning point, for better or worse" (Fink 7).
		
		• "Crisis management deals with managing reality; crisis communications deals with shaping perception" (Fink 8).
		
		• "Crisis management deals with the reality of the crisis. It is the actual management of the precarious situation that is rapidly unfolding. It is making swift and vigilant decisions, gathering resources, marshaling troops, and so on, sometimes under great stress and enormous time

		constraints, to resolve a pressing problem" (Fink 8).
Explicit rhetorical theory	Explicit rhetorical theory will mention rhetorical concepts and use the word *theory*, *research*, *concept*, or *model* alongside the use.	• "Apologia is a rhetorical concept that explores the use of communication for self-defense. A person's character is called into question when she or he is accused of engaging in an action that involves wrongdoing" (Coombs 30).
Implicit rhetorical theory	Implicit rhetorical theory will use rhetorical concepts (or even word) but will not use the words *theory*, *research*, *concept*, or *model* when used.	• "Wendy's should have quickly analyzed the entire situation and said, let the cops do what they do best, and let us do what we do best. The company's responsibility was clear: cooperate with law enforcement, but take care of its customers, its business, and its bottom line" (Fink 38). • "If you have properly identified and then successfully isolated the crisis, the actual management of the crisis is the easiest part" (Fink 39). • "If you can't properly assess the situation, you stand a good chance of missing the keystone crisis, and thereby failing as a skilled crisis manager. This is one of the biggest reasons why so many companies stumble and fail to manage their crises effectively: they focus on the wrong thing" (Fink 42). • "Remembering the people involved and those affected, and using this to improve your actions, means a greater possibility of developing an effective crisis communications response" (Coleman 77). • "The same approach would be beneficial in considering the internal audiences. Start by looking at those who may be involved, the wider teams

		who are affected because of the nature of the issue or incident and the rest of the employees who will be continuing to make the business run" (Coleman 78). • "To move from broadcasting messages in internal communication activities to developing a two-way conversation with employees that is based on listening to them" (Coleman 84–85). • "Communicators must understand and heed cultural beliefs and practices before developing plans, programs, and messages. There are corporate and organizational cultures, community cultures as well as foreign and international cultures" (Fearn-Banks 125). • "Standing on principle is admirable, but it is also important to know one's publics. Who are the patrons? How do taxpayers and community leaders feel? What will be the reaction of the news media? There are places, colleges included, where such a play would not be as successful. Gilbertson knew the people SVSU serves. That is the best advice: to be well acquainted with the people you serve" (Fearn-Banks 131). • "But this crisis can only be understood in relation to the ethos held by the board as it entered the crisis situation" (Coombs 493). • "Nevertheless, if your key publics believe that you are in a crisis (for example, there are unexplained cracks in a new product or unintended acceleration), you are in a crisis" Fink 45).

Theories mentioned and definitions

- **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT):** SCCT provides specific paths for organizations to take based on the crisis, including the rebuilding strategy, diminish strategy, deny strategy, and bolster strategy.

- **Contingency theory:** Contingency theory argues that there is no best way to approach a crisis, and a response needs to be based on the circumstances.

- **Attribution theory:** Attribution theory argues that someone or something is to blame or responsible for a crisis, and the best approach is to hold that entity responsible.

- **Image restoration theory (IRT):** IRT is focused on preserving the reputation of the organization and restoring it to pre-crisis status.

- **Rhetoric of renewal:** Rhetoric of renewal involves learning from a crisis and avoiding future incidents.

- **Anticipatory model/preparation:** The anticipatory model argues that the best approach to a crisis is to plan ahead and have systems and processes in place to manage a crisis.

- **Crisis management:** Crisis management is a general theory about how an organization handles a crisis.

- **Emergency/disaster:** Emergency theory is about how an organization handles a crisis that is an emergency or natural disaster.

- **Excellence theory:** Excellence theory focuses on how organizations can become more effective, including in crisis.

- **Decision theory:** Decision theory is about how someone needs to make decisions in a crisis, and those decisions will determine much of the outcome.

- **Innovations theory.** Innovations theory promotes sharing information during a crisis.