

## Strategy and Serendipity: Teaching Family Communication

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**ABSTRACT.** Life is unpredictable. Neither life nor scholarly careers play out in linear fashion; my professional trajectory developed as a balance of plodding and planning as well as seizing the moment or saying “yes” to unforeseen possibilities. This piece reveals a career trajectory built, in part, by embracing opportunities to teach or write in new areas and, eventually to participate in the creation of the field of family communication. The final section reflects some lessons learned along the way.

Family communication serves as the centerpiece of my career and the source of my intellectual and instructional passion. This seemingly straightforward statement reflects many years of predictable and unpredictable changes or, stated bluntly, backing into possibilities and saying, “Yes”. Essentially, my career trajectory reflects a balance of strategy and serendipity.

My doctoral work in the Speech Education Department in the School of Speech (now the School of Communication) at Northwestern University never included the word “family”, nor did my first eight years of college teaching. I joined the department faculty soon after I completed my dissertation, replacing a colleague who moved into administration. I taught methods classes in speech-communication for future secondary school teachers, observed high school student teachers, and taught a basic course in interpersonal communication. Obviously, this background represents an unlikely route to a career devoted extensively to families and family interaction.

Having joined the Northwestern University faculty at the age of 25, I found myself considering other options periodically in order to stay intellectually alive. After a number of years I explored the chance to leave the plains of Illinois for the mountains of Colorado by applying for a position at the University of Denver. During the interview the department chair mentioned that I would be expected to teach multiple courses in interpersonal communication and one in family communication. The latter course title caught me completely by surprise. He explained that the departing faculty member initiated this course and, due to student demand, the department wished to retain it. To my knowledge no one in the field of speech-communication studied or taught about families; it was hard to imagine what content the course included. Eventually the search was called off but my conversations with the department chair and the departing faculty member cracked open a door. Relying on marital enrichment program material and self-help literature, I developed a family communication unit for my undergraduate interpersonal communication class. Students responded enthusiastically to the content.

After a couple of years I enrolled in a Counseling Psychology master’s program in order to explore a different career possibility while continuing to teach as a tenured faculty member. Around this time a small group of young interpersonal communication scholars

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began research programs focused on marital interaction, I developed a family communication class, and my husband opened a counseling practice. After completing the degree I enrolled in a two year, part time program at the Family Institute of Chicago, a highly respected center for training family therapists. What a privilege to study with family therapy experts such as Charles Kramer, Jeannette Kramer, Miriam Reitz, and William Pinsof—true giants in an emerging field. This program introduced me to the work of Virginia Satir, Gregory Bateson, Jay Haley, and Salvador Minuchin, among others. I loved the counseling experiences and family therapy literature but, at the end of my training, I found myself reluctant to leave the academy for a fulltime therapy practice. *I could not envision my life without students.* For a few years my husband and I collaborated as co-therapists on cases in his private practice as my academic career continued.

In the early years of teaching about families I developed a course in family communication that focused on couple communication and parent-child interactions. Students embraced the material because it touched their lives in unique ways. The classroom came alive with voices because no one could say, “I don’t know anything about this subject.” My early foray in to the area raised the following questions: To what extent should the course be descriptive or prescriptive? Where is the line between instruction and counseling when teaching about families? How should gender and cultural issues be addressed?

Around this time a few interpersonal communication teachers began to teach marital and family communication classes; scholars such as Arthur (Art) Bochner, Mary Anne Fitzpatrick and Edna Rogers launched marital communication research programs. Eventually issues of parent-child communication appeared in the research programs of communication scholars, many of whom taught family communication classes. Programs at the Speech Communication Association (now the National Communication Association) convention included a small band of scholars interested in marital and family communication who would argue about the “lines” between teaching and therapy as well as ethical strategies for studying family interaction. Some of us also participated in related programs at the National Council on Family Relations conferences. Occasionally programs focused on instructional “exercises”, such as Virginia Satir’s family building sculptures or role plays.

An institutional decision impacted my teaching in the early 1990’s. The university closed the Speech Education Department and moved the faculty to the Communication Studies Department, a bittersweet shift that eventually permitted me to concentrate my teaching and scholarly efforts in interpersonal and family communication.

Teaching an undergraduate family communication course continues to be an ongoing highlight of my career. Class discussions of students’ experiences and beliefs connect everyone in the room in unique ways. Approximately 90 percent of my students talk about their family life in class and over 50 percent write their term papers on a topic related to their own life even though I assure them that they need never talk or write about their personal family experiences. Occasionally I encounter a fine line between teaching and counseling. Although I am comfortable holding one or two conversations with a student who is facing a personal issue, I do not wear a therapist hat as a professor. Therefore I refer students to particular staff in Student Health Services as a way to provide them with ongoing support.

In contrast to many of my family communication colleagues who choose to share extensive information about their personal family experiences, I do not talk extensively about my family life in class. My personal life surfaces primarily when talking about interactions within adoptive families, both from the point of view as someone who experienced a second family and as an adoptive mother to one of our three children. My adoption experiences stimulated my teaching and writing about international, interracial adoption.

Over the past 30 years many communication departments have added courses in family communication and a number of doctoral programs in Communication Studies offer classes or specializations in family communication. My current graduate courses include Family Communication and Diversity as well as Family Communication and Health. These classes rely heavily on articles in the *Journal of Family Communication*, *Human Communication Research*, and *Journal of Applied Communication* as well as on scholarship published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Family Relations*, *Family Psychology* and the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

A major career milestone occurred in 1980. A communication editor at Scott Foresman Publishing persuaded me to write a textbook on family communication, because she was receiving requests for such a book and nothing was available. After some thought, I agreed to do so. Bernard Brommel, a former professor at Northeastern Illinois University, joined the project. The first edition of *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* appeared in print in 1982. At that time only 43 of the hundreds of bibliographic references reflected the writings of communication scholars; the vast majority of references represented scholarship in psychology, sociology, counseling, family therapy and family studies. Now in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition, and with a new co-author, the current bibliography contains hundreds of references to the writings of family communication scholars on topics such as diverse family forms, communication theories, forgiveness and health, as well as theories such as communication privacy management theory, family communication patterns theory and relational dialectics theory. Since the mid-1980's, many family communication colleagues have authored excellent undergraduate and graduate textbooks as well as specialized scholarly texts and handbooks. These have enhanced my writing and teaching greatly. The proliferation of family communication articles and books give testimony to the growth of research and scholarship in this field.

Working in a new and developing academic area creates a small but powerfully bonded group of colleagues who construct a specialized academic community as they exchange ideas, and resources. Differences between senior and junior faculty appear less evident as everyone shares their teaching strategies and writings. Today the pioneers express gratitude for their shared scholarly adventures and fledgling collaborations, and for the remarkable contributions of younger colleagues who started their family-oriented research programs during graduate school. These young scholars are breaking new intellectual ground that could not have been imagined only one or two decades ago.

Although their academic worlds appear more regimented and demanding than those of their senior colleagues, my advice to younger scholars in family studies would include the following:

*Take risks.* For better or worse, I have tended to say "Yes" to new opportunities that serendipitously appeared in my academic life. Recent examples involve opportunities to work with faculty in Northwestern University's Medical School which emerged as an

unforeseen byproduct of developing a course in family communication and health. Recently I have participated in a study of how older parents and their adult children, who survived pediatric cancer, talk about their experiences after an average of seventeen years post-treatment. This is my fifth years on an NIH Roadmap grant devoted to oncofertility—an emerging medical area focused on fertility preservation for women and girls confronting fertility-threatening cancer treatments. Although the overall grant focuses on biological research, one small group of social scientists examined stressful family decision making. The study focuses on how parents make time-sensitive decisions about surgical interventions to preserve the fertility of a female child at the same time they make decisions related to their daughter’s immediate need for cancer treatment. Such opportunities opened unimaginable worlds to me, for which I am deeply grateful.

Some of my undergraduate students coded, with IRB approval, the parent interview transcripts. They became intensely involved in the process, working diligently to code the data and prepare their explanations for their choices. Coding discussions were intense because the students took their responsibilities so seriously and because the issues addressed in the transcripts were so compelling. Later, each one expressed gratitude for the opportunity to collaborate on this project.

*Engage in lifelong learning.* The best and brightest scholars and teachers are continuous learners who seek out and engage emerging ideas and methodologies throughout their careers. The problems and issues of today will be compounded and expanded by the realities of tomorrow. Organizational development scholar, Peter Vail\*, argues that we live in a world of “permanent white water”; survival depends on intense and systematic lifelong learning. Young rising stars cannot rest on their laurels. Ongoing scholarly excellence will reflect an ability to recognize how changes in the family impact family members and family forms as well as how changes in society (technology, medicine, economics) impact family life and members’ interactions. For example, evolving scientific research reveals the impact of physiology and genetics on family life and members’ interactions. Every year one’s vocabulary should reflect the exploration of new ideas; this keeps teaching alive and models intellectual engagement for students. When students recognize that faculty members continue to learn new content or skills, they are more motivated to do the same.

*Seek out research partners and multidisciplinary teams.* Increasingly, addressing the big questions in the areas of family studies requires more knowledge, skill and effort than most solo researchers can provide. In a field where many researchers traditionally worked alone or collaborated only with their graduate students, changing research practices challenge this pattern. Today many faculty members and their graduate students serve on large multidisciplinary teams addressing questions related to everything from factors that influence adolescent drug use to the transmission of genetic information within families. Many of these opportunities depend on federal funding or support from private foundations. Knowledge about grant funding enhances researchers’ chances of conducting ongoing, meaningful research that significantly impacts family members’ lives. Talking about such experiences in class or involving graduate students in this research enlarges their academic worlds and motivates many of them to seek similar opportunities in the future.

*Involve graduate and undergraduate students in scholarly work.* For many years I have benefitted from the intelligence and talents of my students. I have engaged

undergraduate students, through work-study and independent study options, to support my academic writing and research. They have assisted in family studies focused on gay male parenting, childhood cancer and adoption. To my delight many students found the work challenging enough that they remained involved far longer than originally planned. In addition, graduate students contribute to my thinking and writing, as well as to data collection. Their input significantly enriches my scholarship and teaching.

Graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants bring unique contributions to my classroom teaching. Undergraduate TA's support the learning of other undergraduates by providing age-appropriate examples from contemporary media or current campus life, giving occasional mini-lectures (5-10 minutes) on selected topics, assisting students who have missed class due to illness, and conducting exam preparation sessions. They do not serve in any evaluative capacity. This creates a win-win situation; I acquire new information or insights and they explore a possible career direction.

My institution provides the gifts of scholarly freedom and talented students although, similar to life in every institution of higher education, one encounters a mix of blessings and challenges. I have been blessed with opportunities to explore new directions both in teaching and research at different points in my career and have been challenged to maintain a high level of productivity year after year. Yet, it is my belief that finding a balance between strategy and serendipity creates unique opportunities for constructing a meaningful life as both a teacher and a scholar.

\*Vaill, P.B. (1996). *Learning as a way of being*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### **Kathleen Galvin Bio**

Kathleen M. Galvin (Ph.D. Northwestern University) is a Professor of Communication Studies. She is also a graduate of The Family Institute's Two Year Training Program in Family Therapy. Her current research interests include family diversity, including transracial adoption, and gay male parenting as well as, family communication about health, with a focus on childhood cancer. Her courses include Family Communication, Theories of Relational Communication and Family Communication about Health. She is the author or co-author of eight books, including *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* (in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition) and the editor of *Making Connections: Readings in Relational Communication* (in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Her writings have appeared in a wide range of communication journals and edited collections. Currently she is developing the concept of discourse-dependent families.