Communicating During COVID-19 and Other Acute-Event Scenarios: A Practical Approach

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Abstract
Successfully adapting to organizational changes during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis necessitated the effective deployment of technical communication texts delineating the expectations and structures for guiding behavior and interactions. A dearth of system-wide familiarity with changes in modalities has disrupted expectations and impacted engagement. During acute events, business and technical communicators will probably not be the initial source of transition messaging. Instead, this task will fall on managers, faculty, and other front-line communicators. The authors present pragmatic recommendations for adapting familiar discourses, semiotics, and mental scripts so that communicators can more effectively intervene during crises to ease organizational transitions and decrease uncertainty.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that traditional communication approaches have fallen short in terms of effectively preparing organizational members for a major shift in work environments. This shortfall has been evident in both businesses’ shifting of their workforce to home-based operations and educational institutions’ shifting of students and faculty to online virtual learning modalities. A lack of system-wide familiarity with managing remote work or online learning, the cultural integration of these modalities into the organizational experience, and confusion over the timing and duration of changes have disrupted expectations and engagement. Although schemata regarding workplace and classroom behaviors and organizational procedures have never been universal, given the wide range of diversity in business cultures and the demographics of students, traditional roles have generally taken root and guided organizational members in their activities. But the rapid shift in mental scripts (which are the more dynamic forms of schemata) due to the unprecedented and rapid move to remote or online work has undermined reliance on learned expectations and activities (St.Amant, 2017, 2021). The failure to communicate updated scripts is a failure of technical communication within organizations that highlights the need to implement more applicable scripts in this ongoing pandemic and be prepared to do so in future modality shifts.

**Scripts and Shifts in Organizational Settings**

*Mental scripts* are reflexive actions developed through repetition of activities that create a cognitive model for the familiar behaviors we engage in daily. These mental scripts allow us to avoid cognitive overload and offer rules for similar scenes that enable people to more effectively cope with situations (Eyal, 2014; Lambrecht, 2021; Tomkins, 1978). Here are the standard components of such scripts (St.Amant, 2021):

- a scene where an objective is being pursued
- entry conditions, or the event that brought about the change in scene
- a sequence of actions that are predicted to occur in the scene
- the roles of participants
- props, or artifacts, that participants will be expected to use
- exit conditions for the return to previous scene prior to entry conditions

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an abrupt and significant shift from the script components that traditionally affected businesses and academia. The scripts for engaging in class or meetings, showing up to work on time, and interacting with peers were replaced with a monotonous work-from-home schedule; detached individual tasks; a lack of ability to see many faces at once, making the electronic interface feel anonymous; and a loss of informal cohort support networks. The implications of these script changes are far-reaching and disruptive. The workforce, students, and faculty had to abandon their concept of a cohort and the social support script that goes with it, as well as their physical environmental interactions and regular accessibility to key personnel and resources. The resulting experience of disconnect and uncertainty from the loss of familiar on-site scripts and their failure to transfer practically to online contexts inhibited peoples’ ability to act effectively and predict the behavior of others within their new environment.

Thus, the clear scripts directing the habitual patterns that those in the workplace and academia had developed over time suddenly needed replacing in order to transform these patterns of behavior to the new environmental expectations (Duhigg, 2012; Graybiel, 1998; St.Amant, 2021). Such disruptions to our existing script elements force a more intense and conscious level of engagement that can detract from the smooth efficiency of our learned habits (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995; Howard-Grenville, 2005; Pentland & Feldman, 2008). Workers, students, and faculty need guidelines to form replacement scripts, particularly since a large number of people have not had previous experience with online modalities. The preference to adapt existing scripts rather than adopt brand new ones is based on research showing that cognitive representations are normally based on experience and not the current environment (Barr et al., 1992; Kiesler & Sproull, 1982; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000). Technical communicators can introduce these updated scripts, then, by developing new informational materials. These new materials can mitigate uncertainty and disruption by integrating applicable scripts to stimulate individuals and organizations to form new habits.

St.Amant argued (2021) that technical communicators should develop new replacement scripts for organizations after determining script expectations through focus groups and interviews with institutional audiences.
Unfortunately, with acute events, such as COVID-19, there is little or no time to develop new scripts before they are needed. In the case of higher education’s response to the pandemic, the rapid shift to online learning modalities was implemented within a week’s time. This rapid shift in modus operandi was mirrored in primary education, the service industry, the health care industry, and small businesses. In these acute-event scenarios, massaging existing scripts is more feasible than researching and developing entirely new ones.

In the case of higher education, students and faculty alike experienced a large-scale upheaval in response to COVID-19 that engendered a cognitive dissonance regarding expectations for postsecondary education. This dissonance has been felt to varying degrees in professional and business contexts as well. The lack of psychological consistency between traditional and emerging scenes is mentally stressful and discomfiting (Boring, 1964; Festinger, 1962; Gu et al., 2015). Thus, when script-related aspects change, technical communicators would be most effective by mimicking or paralleling existing scripts as much as possible in rapidly developing situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic response.

**Technical Communication and Crisis Response**

In acute-event scenarios such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a more realistic and effective technical communication approach to the crisis response would build from the familiar to minimize cognitive dissonance and disruption and to speed the adoption of new behaviors. Academic research shows that allowing experts to communicate is the most effective way to transfer knowledge in an organization, but this modus operandi is inhibited during a crisis (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Shin et al., 2001; Wang & Lu, 2010). Researchers have linked the changes in mental scripts due to the COVID-19 pandemic with increases in uncertainty, suggesting that technical communicators should apply the concepts of uncertainty reduction theory when designing texts for replacement scripts that ensure continuity during these times (Grace & Tham, 2021). Crisis events such as the pandemic introduce unfamiliar changes and therefore ambiguities into our mental scripts that need to be resolved by communication that links familiar scripts within the dynamic context. This script linking can be achieved by using familiar semiotic modes, interactions, and discursive devices that ease the transition.

Across semiotic modes (written, visual, and other means of communication), the use of familiar social semiotics that connect ideas and interactions within interactive contexts (e.g., social scripts) enhance and capacitate social meaning making. Because audiences interpret signs by unconsciously
relating them to familiar conventions (Halliday, 1978; Peirce, 1931, 1958), these familiar scripts need to be reproduced in form (even if not in function) to aid in faster adaptation to new scenarios. In the case of the rushed transfer to remote work and online learning in reaction to the rapidly worsening pandemic, organizational processes that had never been considered for remote or online work had to swiftly evolve. At universities, the resulting new learning-management systems that used familiar interfaces facilitated the transition for both students and faculty. For example, when laboratory courses had to move to virtual modalities, they enabled students’ transition to the new modality by adopting software for instruction that offered virtual interfaces that replicated physical lab equipment and devices and by maintaining the semiotic form for virtual office hours that allowed students and faculty to follow familiar scripts of in-person or on-campus interactions. Conversely, the use of new learning-management systems or features with unfamiliar interfaces inhibited the transition for students and faculty.

Using familiar discursive devices to describe the replacement or modified mental scripts for the new contexts in an acute-event scenario can help audiences more rapidly adapt to the “new normal.” The technical communication texts regarding shifting scripts (e.g., instructions, FAQs, online embedded help, web-based training, instructional design, how-to videos) exist in multilayered contexts and play a relevant role in a crisis (Mohd Don & De Rycker, 2013). The discourse used in communicating during a crisis event can create, reinforce, or subvert existing mental scripts. Organizational discourse is often routine (predictable), task related, asymmetrical, and regulated (Koester, 2010). Examples of such discourse include the narratives for participating in meeting or classroom discussions, showing up prepared for work or class, engaging in synchronous interactions (e.g., traditional lectures and seminar discussions as opposed to the asynchronous offline learning that is more common in virtual delivery), and other narratives that parallel on-site scripts in order to smooth the transition for organizational members during the abrupt change.

**Communication in Acute-Event Scenarios Such as COVID-19**

Traditionally, technical communicators are responsible for developing materials that help smooth transitions and manage organizational changes during crises. This role should encompass educating the organization about changes in the environment impacting evolving needs and expectations. But due to the rapidly developing situation in acute crisis scenarios,
technical communicators may not have as prominent a role in the initial organizational communications as do individual front-line participants (Nichols et al., 2020; Seeger et al., 1998). Instead, technical communicators may take on a supporting role in assisting front-line organizational members, such as managers in the workplace and faculty in educational settings. These front-line members will need to immediately execute shifts in scripts (Jacobsson et al., 2018). Although in acute scenarios, technical communicators are unable to fulfill their traditional role of thoroughly researching stakeholders and their communication needs before implementing texts, they do have an opportunity to engage the issue early by distributing key messaging and discursive rubrics to front-line staff.

Technical communicators’ collaboration with managers in crisis communication groups has been found to enable more effective decision making (Janis, 1973; Janis & Mann, 1977; Seeger et al., 1998). Such collaboration should include

- informing the managers of the need for communicating schematic shifts
- explaining the benefits of modifying existing scripts rather than developing and deploying new ones
- obtaining feedback from managers regarding the familiar scripts that would work for managers’ direct reports
- using the available technologies to support re-creating familiar scripts.

For example, in educational settings, team collaboration between front-line staff (support staff and instructional faculty) and technical communicators (public relations and marketing practitioners, human resource representatives, and administrators) identified changes in student engagement that required instructors to increase their real-time interaction with students and provide them with timely responses and feedback as well as training for online work (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Perets et al., 2020). Likewise, in business settings, team collaboration between front-line staff (managers) and technical communicators (public relations practitioners, human resource representatives, and upper-level executives) identified changes in worker engagement that required managers to implement daily check-ins, use videoconferencing for group work, and provide opportunities for informal online social interactions between coworkers (Larson et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).
While we suggest that technical communicators use the COVID-19 event as a case study and engage in thorough research processes to inform future material development, they must keep in mind that the nature of acute events and crises is unpredictable and dynamic. Such events often require immediate engagement with limited time to prepare for complex script changes. As such, we advise communicators to take the following actions:

- Identify existing semiotic conventions and discourses that can be emphasized to maintain a familiar anchor during transitions.
- Identify changing script elements that have the potential to create confusion or uncertainty and then develop new materials that massage and adapt familiar or existing scripts as much as possible to cover those changes.
- Monitor ongoing events as they emerge during crises and develop targeted messaging to reduce uncertainty and establish clear expectations for interactions and behavior.
- Assess the effectiveness of messaging as it deploys and integrate the successful messaging with the ongoing communication campaign to maintain a level of consistency that will assist in developing new organizational scripts.
- Reach out to front-line organizational members to obtain their feedback and their own successful messaging in order to inform and enhance ongoing communication at the organizational level.

Examples of actions that help adjust existing semiotic schemata include re-creating familiar organizational engagement by using remote technologies in ways that mimic traditional formal and informal communication channels, which helps to maintain continuity and successful adaptation during acute-event scenarios; consistently using traditional phrasing in communication, which enables audiences to more rapidly associate the new working environment with the established precrisis operations; and enlisting the variety of traditional channels for communication that organizational members utilized prior to the acute scenario, which helps technical communicators vary their mediums so that they do not create messaging fatigue. Essentially, replacing important interpersonal communication with virtual communication necessitates maintaining the form (i.e., scripts) for both informal and formal interactions in order to enable their continued function despite changes in channels.
Conclusion
Successfully adapting to organizational changes during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis necessitated the effective deployment of technical communication texts that emphasize expectations for behavior and interactions and the structures for guiding them. The lack of system-wide familiarity with changes in modalities disrupted expectations and affected engagement because mental schemata regarding workplace and classroom behaviors no longer fit. During acute events, technical communicators will not be the initial source of transition messaging. Instead, this task will fall on front-line communicators, such as managers, faculty, and others. But technical communicators can effectively intervene to ease the transition and decrease uncertainty during crises by applying or adapting familiar mental scripts as much as possible, based on the feedback and experience of front-line personnel.

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