"What would you do, if you were Kim?" Using narrative-based method for improving dialogic communication ethics abilities

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to propose a model for the construction of narratives for the development of competencies related to dialogic communication ethics. A narrative-based approach is a widely used method for training ethical discussions. However, little attention has been paid to how to construct field-based narratives that enable the training of specific sub-competences. In this article, we highlight the components necessary for the construction of narratives and explain, through an example, the possible applications of these components. The specificity of training in dialogic communication ethics is that narratives should be constructed on the basis of the normative discourses of communication, media and journalistic ethics.

Keywords: dialogic communication; ethics; narrative; civic education.

1. Introduction

The turbulent times in public communication sphere raises new challenges for communication ethics. The role of dialogic communication in public participation has been emphasized by various authors (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Yang et al., 2015, Escobar, 2011). The theory of dialogic communication ethics (DCE) has been developed by various authors who have focused on the ethical implications of dialogue in communication (e.g. Arnett et al., 2006, Arnett et al., 2009). For applying the concept of DCE in practice, it is important to create didactics for specifically training the relevant competences. We see the didactics for dialogic communication to support the moral/ethical competence and recognize it to be an important component of civic education.

The present article focuses on one didactical approach: a narrative-based method for training the communication ethics competencies. We use the word "narrative," although the terms "scenario" and "vignette" are also used in the scholarship of ethics training. The narrative approach seems to be preferable, as narrative theory typically includes actors who have specific motives and a temporal dimension of actions.

In this article, we demonstrate the methodology for constructing narratives that can be used to specifically train moral sensitivity and awareness; moral imagination; moral reasoning, and moral decision making. Narrative-based methodologies have been developed to facilitate ethical decision-making by many authors (e.g., Cohen, 1993; Nelson, 1992; Baldor et al., 2001; Bekir et al., 2001; Parder et al., 2024; Dilemma Game, n.d.), however, distinguishing the moral problems concerning communication from general ethical dilemmas (e.g., questions related to abortion where different layers of ethics disciplines are present (medical ethics, research ethics, elements of communication ethics)) is not always easy. It is important to point out that DCE additionally needs motivation and abilities to create and hold a dialogue: e.g. listening, understanding, responding, fair argumentation abilities (e.g., Wolvin, 2010).

In order to find and construct narratives that specifically train the competences of DCE, one needs to be familiar with the main normative discourses related to communication, media, information, and, more generally, communication ethics. The discourses can be found from textbooks, handbooks and various publications that discuss communication, media and journalism ethics. A slightly robust systematization enables to summarize the slightly different variations of recurring discourses (e.g., Duncan, 2023; Eberwein, 2021; Fourie, 2021; Harcup, 2021; Wasserman, 2020; Christians, 2019; Aznar & Castillo-Martin, 2018; Tompkins, 2015; Wasserman, 2015; Plaisance, 2014; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013; Arnett et al., 2010; Liapri, 2006).

Some of the clusters of values and principles of normative regulation of communication, media and journalism are presented in the list. While this list is not exhaustive, it provides a brief illustrative overview that demonstrates how narratives can be identified from daily practice and categorized according to topical areas.

1. Cluster of truth-telling and honesty: Problems of deception, opposing mis- and disinformation; avoidance of manipulation, balance, impartiality (objectivity); principles of source verification and source attribution; transparency
2. Cluster of a culture of dialog: (Active) listening and engagement; mutual respect; absence of coercive power in communication; equal access to information and freedom to speak out.
3. Cluster of human dignity and autonomy: Principle of compassion and politeness; principle of opposing hate speech; duty to care and minimize harm; principle of informational self-determination and informed consent.
4. Cluster of free speech: Value of different opinions and the right to disagree.
5. Principle of sensitivity to vulnerability and privacy: Understanding and acknowledging the feelings, experiences, and challenges faced by vulnerable population (e.g., children, people with specific health conditions, etc.); principle of avoiding exploitation.

We argue that the narrative approach enables to train five moral sub-competencies: moral sensitivity and moral awareness, moral imagination, moral reasoning, and moral judgment. We

explain how each of these specific competencies can be trained using different types of constructed narratives.

2. The sources of filed-specific narratives

The narrative approach enables learners to exercise their moral competence through field-specific narratives, helping them become aware of aspects they may have previously overlooked. However, it is crucial to first transform daily life experiences into specific cases and then purposefully construct narratives from those cases.

These field-specific cases could be found from frequently debated public issues as well as from academic scholarship in media and communication ethics, as illustrated by the clusters presented in the Introduction.

Public communication as well as the cases that include morally problematic issues happen on five levels: (1) (intra)personal level; (2) interpersonal level; (3) professional and organizational level; (4) public level; and (5) global level. Therefore, the situations which include ethical communication problem and may be turned into narratives may arise at public meetings, e-mails or by means of public media (journalistic publications, social media posts, advertising etc.). These situations can be interpreted into "cases" if anyone is motivated and has moral sensitivity to recognize the moral problems in these situations and describe these situations prom the point of view of any moral actor.

In addition, there are other sources to rely on for inspiration:

- fictional stories (books and films);

- lawsuits, complaints sent to the ethics councils and the relevant decisions;

- media scandals (scandals always include the moral questions and conflict of values);

- narratives provided by people telling stories about their lives or what they experienced (we propose to call this type of source "raw narratives").

The case can be constructed into a narrative for teaching purposes in two different ways. In the first approach, the narrative is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, where the learner must discern the characters, their power dynamics and loyalty obligations, the moral choices they face, and how one character's decision impacts others.

In the second approach, which we explore in greater detail in the present article, the narrative is framed from the viewpoints of two (or, in exceptional cases, three) characters. This method particularly enhances the development of moral imagination and empathy of the learner.

A third option involves constructing narratives that present multiple solutions to the learner. In this scenario, the learner's task is to evaluate the behaviors of all the characters and determine

which option appears morally correct to them. This latter approach has been used in games powered targeted to broader public with various moral theories (deontology, teleology, care ethics etc.) serving as the foundation for these choices (see, for example, Parder et al., 2024).

3. Constitutive elements of the narratives

When constructing narratives, there are certain steps to consider. Current method is development from the methodology set out by Parder et al. (2024) and focuses on creating narratives for training the communication ethics competencies.

First, each narrative must contain a principle of value of communication ethics. Such principle or value is described in the narrative as norm (see example in 3.1). As explained in the introduction, background knowledge regarding the normative clusters is beneficial.

Secondly, each narrative contains two or three active characters in the interaction between which a communication ethical conflict or a decision-making moment arises.

Thirdly, the narratives can be presents from the point of view of two (in some cases, three) characters. In the concept of dialogic communication ethics, stepping into the shoes of the other is important, because it develops empathy and moral imagination.

Fourth, since each case presents the point of view of two (or three) characters, it is also important to pay attention to the sequence of the actions of the narrative in time. The narrative presented from the second character's point of view may be a step behind in time compared to the narrative written from the first character's point of view. It is important that each narrative contains minimal background information about the characters' motives and flows over time during a single interaction.

And fifth, each narrative must contain a moment of moral decision-making or moral "cross-road".

In some cases, the decision-making moment reflects a clear violation of a norm of communication ethics. In such case, the question of moral judgement is how to interpret the violation and how to respond to the corresponding interpretation. Some other narratives are not about any violation or a principle of communication ethics but the interpretation of the principle. In such cases, the decision-making moment will be more blurred.

3.1. Example: violation of the general norm of good communication conduct

We present one case where the central narrative is presented from two different perspectives. The narrative starts with a headline that should provide a hint concerning the "cluster" of the communication, media or journalism ethics. This is useful, if the narratives are used for training various target groups.

Offensive expression in the internal list of the organization

Allan is a new employee in the organization. One day he discovers that the regulation, which has been interpreted narrowly at all times within the organization, can also be interpreted in another way. Allan finds it important to report, such as possible error on all employees and makes the corresponding post to the organization list.

Kim, one of the longtime employees, reacts to Allan's post by writing an answer on the public list that he believes Allan has no competence to express such an opinion, given his prior professional experience.

Allan feels that this personal and public attack on him is not acceptable.

What would you do if you were Allan

This narrative is presented from the perspective of first actor Allan. The communication levels that are covered with this situation are interpersonal (between Allan and Kim) and organizational (public communication on an organizational level). The narrative also gives the judgement of Kim's act from Allan's point of view: personal public attack is not acceptable. The judgement indicates what is the "moral crossroads" for Allan – a decision point, they cannot ignore (or point, where ignoring is also a decision in itself). With the last question the person is offered a possibility for moral imagination and their possible solution to it – what would you do? The aim is not to criticize someone else, therefor it is not asked "What should Allan do?".

After the narrative is solved by the learner, they are presented with another perspective of the situation, in this case Kim's perspective.

Kim has worked for many years in a field that implements and interprets regulations concerning X issues. One day, he reads a post by a new employee, Allan, in which Allan claims the regulation has so far been interpreted too narrowly. Kim feels that Allan, as a new employee, is criticizing an area he doesn't know thoroughly. Kim posts a comment in which he says Allan has no competence to express such views. Later Kim receives a phone call from a colleague who says Kim's personal public attack towards Allan was not proportional.

What would you do if you were Kim?

In this case, Kim's motivations are presented: (1) they have extensive expertise in this area; (2) they feel they are being criticized; and Kim's action on how they handle the situation (with a public response). There is a slight difference in the temporal setting of the situation, as Kim gets an additional impulse for making a decision form a colleague (third actor in the situation, who themselves have made a decision to act) who gives a moral judgement to the situation and indicates a violation of communication ethics principle – the feedback makes it a moral crossroads for Kim, a point they cannot ignore.

4. Conclusion

Moral sensitivity and awareness refer to the ability to recognize ethical problems in a given situation. The aim of the narratives is to enhance trainees' moral sensitivity and awareness by providing "clean" stories where ethical decision-making scenarios are clearly presented to the actors of the story. The constructed narrative usually provides circumstances that lead to the communication ethical problem.

Moral imagination involves the capacity to consider diverse perspectives, envision multiple ethical possibilities, and recognize the complexities involved in various situations, such as the ability to imagine the impact of one's decisions on others (Werhane, 1999). In narrative construction, moral imagination is cultivated as narratives can be written from the perspectives of different characters within the story.

Moral reasoning is often defined as an "umbrella" competence that includes moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral motivation. In the present study, we use *moral reasoning* in a more specific sense—it refers to the process of identifying, evaluating, and choosing between different moral principles or values when faced with ethical problems. In some narratives, especially those that involve misconduct, the story explicitly highlights certain values or principles. However, it is also possible to construct a narrative where the values and principles under consideration are embedded within the description of the situation. Moral reasoning can be trained through narratives if the trainee attempts to balance different principles and values to create a hierarchy of their preferences.

Purposefully constructed narrative: (1) enable individuals to apply basic and practical concepts of ethics and dialogic communication theory and normative discourses to a range of communication context, including the media, interpersonal relationships, and political communication; (2) to facilitate the individual learners' capacity to develop moral sensitivity and moral imaginations, carry out moral reasoning as well as to empower professional groups to engage in moral reasoning; and (3) to encourage the individual learners to apply their comprehension of communication ethics to their personal experience.

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