Communication Ethics in the Communication Curriculum: United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico

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This study investigated the status of communication ethics pedagogy at colleges and universities in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Data were collected from 193 institutions that responded to an online survey. Results showed an increase in communication ethics courses compared with 19 years ago, with 51% now offering a required or optional course in communication ethics. The most common reason for not offering a stand-alone course was that ethical concerns were included in other classes. Respondents noted a decrease in focus on classical ethical theory and an increase in attention to applied ethics and moral reasoning skills. These findings merit a disciplinary discussion of the perceived tension between the classical philosophical foundations of communication ethics and ethics in practice.

Keywords: Communication Ethics; Pedagogy; Communication Ethics Courses; Survey; Communication Curricula

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From 1977 to 1996, Clifford Christians examined the role of communication ethics in the communication curriculum through a nationwide survey; it has been nearly 20 years since the last survey (Christians & Lambeth, 1996) of members of the discipline about how they teach communication ethics. In the intervening years, much has changed. Communication programs have continued to grow, and research in communication ethics has taken a “dialogic turn” (Arnett, Arneson, & Bell, 2006) where scholars have begun to focus on the engagement of difference (Makau, 2011).

This project builds on Christians (1977, 1985) and Christians and Lambeth’s (1996) studies of how communication ethics was incorporated into communication programs across the United States. Specifically, it considers and extends existing scholarship designed to investigate the teaching of communication ethics within undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as highlights curricular and pedagogical practices.

**History and Pedagogy of Communication Ethics Courses**

*Communication Ethics Courses over Time*

*Communication ethics instruction across the discipline.* Christians et al. led the way in studying how communication ethics was taught in communication programs in the United States, with a focus on journalism and media ethics. Between 1977 and 1984, media ethics courses increased from 68 to 117 in what Christians (1985) described as a “boomlet” (p. 17). This increase in ethics instruction signaled a burgeoning “meaningful dimension of education in journalism, broadcasting, and advertising” (p. 51). In another article, Christians and Lambeth (1996) found that almost 30% of Speech Communication and Communication Studies Departments offered a stand-alone ethics course. Based on responses from 201 participants, they found that 73 stand-alone ethics courses were offered at 59 schools with 58% of the courses being required for majors. The authors reported that 20 additional programs planned to offer ethics courses for a total of 79 schools or 39% of schools offering stand-alone ethics courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Another 168 programs provided units within other courses focused on ethics instruction, according to Christians and Lambeth, and they concluded that “rather than detract from this longstanding concern to at least introduce students to ethics in a module, the growth in free-standing courses has stimulated these introductory efforts even more” (p. 238). They identified challenges to teaching communication ethics as well as a need for scholarly research in this area; nonetheless, they confirm that communication ethics continues to be “important educationally” (p. 242).

While Christians’ surveys focused on how journalism and media ethics were taught within communication programs, Jensen (1985) argued for instruction on ethics across different domains of the communication curriculum including interpersonal communication, small group communication, public speaking, and mass communication. When he asserted that making “the tough ethical decisions in communicative transactions rest[s] with all of us” (p. 329), he stressed communication scholars’ collective and individual burden and opportunity to provide effective instruction in
this skill set. More than 20 years later, Christians (2008) tracked the exponential growth and solidification of the field of communication ethics by positing five major areas of instruction and inquiry: theory, social philosophy, religious ethics, technology, and truth. His research also found a continued commitment to developing the moral imagination of practitioners.

Stand-alone communication ethics courses. Among scholars who study the impact of ethics courses on undergraduate and graduate students, many agree on the value of stand-alone communication ethics courses (Kostyu, 1990; Lee & Padgett, 2000; McEuen, Gordon, & Todd-Mancillas, 1990). For example, Yoder and Bleske (1997) investigated the impact of ethics courses and education in moral reasoning on journalism students’ decision-making abilities. A total of 210 students responded to a questionnaire before and after taking a mass media ethics course. Following the media ethics course, the authors found that students could explain their moral reasoning and gained confidence in their decision-making abilities. Yoder and Bleske’s findings illustrate the value of a stand-alone mass media ethics course with education in moral reasoning.

In a study conducted 10 years later, Plaisance (2007) similarly found that after students took a stand-alone media ethics course, they changed how they ranked values related to the media and journalism. For example, Plaisance reported that students in media ethics courses ranked the values of “fair,” “independent,” and “aboveboard” considerably higher after the course. In sum, research suggests that sustained, focused approaches to communication ethics foster complexity in reasoning and thorough decision-making among students.

Whereas multiple articles assess stand-alone communication ethics courses at the undergraduate level, we found only one source that considered communication ethics education at the graduate level. McEuen et al. (1990) came to a similar conclusion as other scholars on the value of stand-alone communication ethics courses after considering how doctoral programs in communication specifically educate graduate students in research ethics and research methods. Based on 46 responses (78% response rate), the authors evaluated the instruction and curricula of research ethics courses, professors’ educational background in research ethics, and assigned readings on ethics. They discovered that none of the responding doctoral programs in communication offered a stand-alone course focused solely on research ethics. In addition, McEuen et al. noted, “30 percent of the responding Ph.D. programs do not offer a course where research ethics issues are even partially discussed” (p. 288). Thus, they recommend doctoral students study communication research ethics in preparation for future moral challenges and the complex decision-making process they could encounter as scholars. The communication literature points to the significance of stand-alone communication ethics courses for journalism, mass communication, and advertising students as well as the need for communication ethics courses across the communication field and specifically for graduate courses in communication research ethics.
Pedagogical Approaches to Communication Ethics

Theoretical and applied content in communication ethics courses. Other practical recommendations for teaching communication ethics courses focus on the ultimate efficacy of the theoretical and applied content of ethics courses. Barger and Elliott (2000) argue that journalism ethics courses benefit from instruction by practitioners or educators who have a solid understanding of theoretical ethics as well as experience in the deadline-to-deadline world of journalism. Doing so prevents facile references to ethics and helps students make more sophisticated ethical analysis in the classroom and develops better journalists. On this point, Barger and Elliott are not alone. Christians (2008) argued forcefully for teaching classical theoretical approaches even in courses focused on applied ethics, citing that theories ought not to be treated in static, scholastic terms, but as oppositional claims about the world. He notes that “the long-term future of the field depends on the common language of theory, not as an abstract authority, but to assist us in thinking more systematically about the major league issues” (p. 185).

The debate about the value of theoretical versus applied ethical consideration is not a new debate in the academy. Immanuel Kant (1785/1962) argued for a twofold metaphysic of nature and morals. In doing so, he suggested that as physics has two parts, ethics should also have an empirical or applied part and a rational or theoretical part. The tension between the two parts remains today. Contemporary views on the debate of theory versus the applied approach to teaching ethics vary across the academy. In contrast to Kant, some scholars argue for the primacy of the applied method. Rob Lawlor (2007), writing in the medical field, argued against teaching moral theories while teaching applied ethics because too much information is required to do both. More substantively, he asserted, “there is a methodological problem with appealing to moral theories to solve the particular issues in applied ethics” (p. 370). Lawlor (2007) appears to contradict himself later when he suggested that students need an understanding of ethical theory because they will inevitably come across it in the literature. However, many philosophers and scholars oppose a theory-free ethics course. They suggest that teaching applied ethics in collaboration with theoretical lenses is a constructive way to provide students with an understanding of both practical and theoretical aspects of ethical decision-making (Cribb, 2010; Saunders, 2010; Singer, 1986). Furthermore, Christians (2011) warned, “in working on theory, journalism educators find the classical approaches indispensable; in their absence, we reinvent the wheel or promote theory with no sophistication” (p. 201).

Torbjörn Tännsjö (2011) suggested that teaching applied ethics provides students with both a practical sense of ethical decision making and a theoretical understanding of their moral obligations related to those decisions. One of the earliest applied ethicists, Peter Singer (1986), asserted that applied ethics “continues to thrive” (p. 4). According to Singer: “This should cause no surprise; it is testimony to the perennial importance of the issues discussed, and to the need for them to be discussed with the greatest possible clarity and rigour” (p. 4).
Instructional methods. Other communication researchers are more focused on the instructional methods for teaching media and communication ethics courses (Barger & Elliott, 2000; Goree, 2000). Braun (1999) examined students’ views of media ethics instruction in light of educational goals, teaching techniques, standards and values in ethics education, and multiculturalism in the ethics course. The author found that students appreciate media ethics courses where instructors provide a variety of teaching methods including “case studies, input from media professionals, panels of opposing viewpoints, and small group discussions” (p. 181). Similarly, Canary (2007) learned that effective use of case studies increased students’ ability to morally reason by engaging them in situations with which they could relate. Thus, the literature asserts the importance of stand-alone communication ethics courses, emphasizes the vital nature of teaching classical theoretical approaches to communication ethics, and describes instructional methods beneficial to teaching media ethics.

Research Questions

To assess whether communication ethics is being taught in a manner consistent with the best practices identified in the literature and to remain consistent with and build upon Christians’ (1985) study and Christians and Lambeth’s (1996) research about how communication ethics is currently taught in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico, we developed the following research questions to guide our study:

RQ1a: Are communication programs at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels offering communication ethics courses?
RQ1b: If communication ethics courses are not being offered, what reasons are cited?
RQ1c: How many communication ethics courses have been developed recently?
RQ2: Are communication ethics concepts being taught as modules within other courses?
RQ3a: What is the perceived standing of communication ethics within the communication studies curriculum?
RQ3b: What is the perceived importance of different course objectives in communication ethics courses?
RQ4: How is communication ethics being taught within departments?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of department chairs or faculty representatives of departments knowledgeable about how communication ethics is taught in their departments. Of the 245 people who completed part or all of the survey, respondents averaged 19.3 (SD = 10.4) years teaching at the college or university level and tended to be associate (37.5%) or full professors (35.1%). The remaining respondents were instructors (6.9%), assistant professors (14.3%), lecturers (2.0%), named professors or endowed chairs (1.2%), visiting professors (0.8%), or other (2.0%). A little over one-
third of respondents (39.2%) served as chairs of their departments and, on average, each had held the position of chair for 6.4 years.

Institutionally, our respondents represented 193 unique institutions in 42 states, Puerto Rico, and Saskatchewan, Canada. Duplicate responses about the institution were removed; if more than one person responded from an institution, any conflicts in responses were resolved by researching the university’s website and a single response was used. Because the survey focused on institutions that offer four-year degrees or higher and sought to replicate what Christians’ research group did in prior studies, the five responses from community colleges were removed. The response rate for verifiably unique institutions was 20.1%, though it could have been slightly higher because 16 respondents did not provide institutional information. While this response rate is low, it is above the average online survey response rate (Lozar Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas, & Vehovar, 2008).

The four regional communication associations were well represented by the institutions surveyed; the largest proportion of institutions were from the region covered by Central States Communication Association (31.7%), then Southern States Communication Association (27.7%), Eastern Communication Association (21.8%), and Western States Communication Association (18.8%). Of those surveyed, participants reported that 42.6% were private and not-for-profit, 0.5% were private and for profit, and 56.5% were public institutions. Overall, the greatest number of responses came from large institutions (36.7%) as defined in the Carnegie classification descriptions (Classification description, n.d.).

Materials

In the interest of consistency, the survey used for this research was based on the one used by Christians (1977, 1985) and Christians and Lambeth (1996) to assess how faculty taught ethics in journalism and communication programs. We modified the survey to fit the needs of a wide variety of communication departments, including those with journalism courses and those focused solely on human communication. Some survey items were modified because of changes in teaching technology since Christians’ research was conducted. For example, we omitted mention of overheads and other technologies that are no longer used as frequently.

The survey began by asking respondents to provide demographic information including their academic rank, the number of years they taught in higher education, whether they were serving as the department chair, and, if so, for how long. The survey included questions about the institution including the institution’s name, the department’s name, the type of institution (private versus public), and the size of the institution. In addition, questions probed for program details, including whether the department or academic unit taught a separate communication ethics course for undergraduate and/or graduate students, and whether the course was a required or an elective offering. If the department did not offer a communication ethics course, a survey question asked about the department’s reasons. Our survey was designed to learn the titles of communication ethics courses, whether a particular course was
required for some students, and whether the course was adopted in the past two years. Respondents were asked if communication ethics was taught as a module within skills or conceptual courses. In addition, the survey asked for faculty members’ opinions on the standing of communication ethics as a field within Communication Studies, the importance of a variety of course objectives, and the value of communication ethics courses in the communication curriculum. Respondents were also asked to provide information about assessment tools used and perspectives from which communication ethics is taught (e.g., moral philosophy, social science, religious, philosophy of communication, etc.). Lastly, respondents were queried on pedagogical techniques used in the course, useful supporting materials (audio-recordings, films, clickers, tablets, social media, etc.), and the textbooks used.

Procedure

We sent a link to a web-based survey and a description of the study’s goals to all subscribers of CRTNET twice, in May and September of 2013. On September 6, 2013, the survey was also emailed to a listserv of the Communication Ethics Division of NCA. The most comprehensive attempt to contact department chairs occurred on September 5 and 23, 2013, when we emailed a link to the survey to 960 department chairs in the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico. We compiled an email list from a publicly available spreadsheet on the NCA website that lists communication programs, we cross-checked it against the NCA membership directory, and we searched university and college websites for the department chairs’ contact information. Since the list from NCA did not include all communication programs in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico, members of the research team added to the list based on their knowledge of particular regions. The aim was to be as comprehensive as possible while extending Christians’ research to acknowledge and take account of the valuable work being done in this area by colleagues outside of the U.S. border, namely in Puerto Rico and Canada. In spite of our aims, we may have missed some colleges and universities that offer communication programs. In late October 2013, the survey was taken offline.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question asked whether communication programs at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels offered communication ethics courses (1a), if not, why not (1b), and how recently communication ethics courses were developed (1c). At the undergraduate level, 51.4% \((n = 52)\) respondents reported that a communication ethics course was required in the major, 15.8% \((n = 16)\) said that it was on a list of required courses, 26.7% \((n = 27)\) noted that it was an elective course, and 5.9% \((n = 6)\) stated that communication ethics was occasionally offered as a topics course. At the graduate level, 38.6% \((n = 17)\) reported that ethics was a required course, 6.8% \((n = 3)\) had a communication ethics course on a list of required courses, while 18.2% \((n = 8)\) and 36.3% \((n = 16)\) documented that the course was
either an elective course or a topics course that was occasionally offered. It is important to note that the total number of respondents for undergraduate and graduate programs is lower than the total number of survey respondents because, in some cases, there were duplicate participants from a single university and the goal of this research question was to discover information at the program level.

Respondents chose a variety of reasons that their communication programs did not offer communication ethics as a separate course in undergraduate or graduate programs. At the undergraduate level, two primary reasons emerged for not offering a separate communication ethics course: other courses in the major covered ethics-related material (57.1%), and respondents saw little value in adding the course to their department’s curriculum (38.4%). At the graduate level, respondents most commonly indicated there was no room in the curriculum (54.2%); however, this result could be due to an error in the survey questions on graduate-level communication ethics courses. The error in this section excluded the option that communication ethics was covered in units in other courses. See Table 1 for more details about the reasons that undergraduate and graduate programs choose not to offer a separate communication ethics course.

At the undergraduate level, 17 (14.5%) respondents stated that their departments created a communication ethics course in the preceding two years, while 100 (85.5%) reported that their departments developed the courses prior to that time. At the masters level, four (15.4%) respondents answered that their departments created their courses in the previous two years; 22 (84.6%) respondents noted that the courses had been designed and implemented earlier. At the doctoral level, no programs reported creating a communication ethics course in the last two years; four noted a previously developed communication ethics course.

Research Question 2

The second research question examined whether communication ethics concepts were taught as modules within other courses. A majority of programs, 61.8% ($n = 115$), offered communication ethics modules within their undergraduate courses, while 38.2% ($n = 71$) reported that they do not. Skills courses (57.5%, $n = 103$) were
the most common courses where communication ethics modules were taught, though 87 (48.6%) respondents reported that there were ethics modules taught in conceptual courses. Note that responses total more than 100% because respondents could check both options (skills courses and conceptual courses).

Research Question 3

The third research question considered the standing of communication ethics within the communication studies curriculum (3a), as well as the value of different course objectives in communication ethics courses (3b). Overall, respondents were lukewarm in their assessment of the value of communication ethics as a field within the communication discipline ($M = 2.59, SD = 1.03$) and whether progress had been made in improving the quality of communication ethics instruction ($M = 2.49, SD = .91$). Further details about people’s responses about communication ethics as a field are provided in Table 2.

“Fostering moral reasoning skills” was perceived as the most important course objective for respondents, with “preparing students for professional work” perceived as the second most important. “Helping students understand classical ethical theory” had the fewest respondents who perceived it as indispensable and was most likely to be rated as only somewhat important. For more details about how respondents rated course objectives, see Table 3.

Overall, respondents were neutral about the need for more communication ethics courses in their own department’s program ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.02$) and the need to integrate communication ethics into their department’s programs ($M = 2.37, SD = .99$) or into courses in the communication discipline ($M = 2.51; SD = .98$). Respondents agreed students need to learn about communication ethics to be successful professionals ($M = 1.61, SD = .69$). They also stated that they do not engage in disciplinary struggles with the philosophy department to teach communication ethics ($M = 3.96, SD = 1.00$). Further details about respondents’ opinions about the importance of teaching communication ethics are found in Table 4.

Table 2 Standing of Communication Ethics as a Subdiscipline in Communication Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication ethics has established an essential place in the curricula of most major communication programs.</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant progress has been made over the past 20 years by increasing the breadth and quality of communication ethics instruction at colleges and universities across the U.S.A.</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough college and university professors have the preparation and training necessary to conduct communication ethics research that makes a real difference in the field itself.</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: On the scale, 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = unsure, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.
Our fourth research question asked respondents to describe how communication ethics was taught in their departments. A large majority of respondents ($n = 104$, 90.4%) were familiar with the content of the communication ethics courses taught in their departments. They stated that a majority of the students taking a communication ethics course were juniors and seniors ($n = 93$) and, to a lesser extent, freshmen and sophomores ($n = 15$) or graduate students ($n = 13$).

Table 5 shows the perspectives taken in the course, pedagogical techniques, supporting materials, and assessments used in the courses. The most common perspectives taken in communication ethics courses were from moral philosophy (32.3%) and philosophy of communication (30.2%). Least common was a religious perspective (7.8%). Lectures by instructors (19.8%) and case studies (19.3%) were by far...
the most common pedagogical techniques. Least common were lectures by academics from other departments (2.0%) and the use of novels or plays (4.2%). The most commonly used supporting materials were films/videos (25.5%) and presentational programs like PowerPoint and Prezi (21.3%). The least common supporting materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching perspectives and techniques</th>
<th>Responses per item</th>
<th>Percentage of responses</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral philosophy</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy of communication</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical techniques</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role playing</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulation games</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panels of opposing viewpoints</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies of ethical decision making</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures by instructors</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>94.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures by outside professionals</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures by academics from other departments (e.g., philosophy)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group discussions</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>91.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novels or plays</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting materials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio-recordings</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Films/videos</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PowerPoint/Prezi, etc.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phones</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clickers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablets (iPads, etc.)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical profile paper</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service-learning/community service project</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-led discussions</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor-guided discussions</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examinations</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>81.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Because respondents could select more than one option, the sum of the responses is greater than the number of participants.
\(^a\)N = 104.
included clickers (0.9%) and mobile phones (1.8%). Instructor-guided discussion (16.4%) and case studies (15.5%) were the most common forms of assessment. The least common was a service-learning or community service project (4.9%).

Because this study focused on the wider discipline of communication studies, we asked participants about textbooks that cover communication ethics more broadly, instead of in a particular area such as media or journalism ethics. We found that many instructors created their own reading lists and did not use textbooks. Overall, the most commonly used textbook was Johannesen, Valde, and Whedbee’s (2008) *Ethics in Human Communication* (n = 18), followed by Arnett, Fritz, and Bell’s (2009) *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference* (n = 14), Neher and Sandin’s (2007) *Communicating Ethically: Character, Duties, Consequences, and Relationships* (n = 14), and Tompkins’ (2011) *Practicing Communication Ethics: Development, Discernment, and Decision-Making* (n = 8). Other textbooks noted multiple times by respondents included a variety from media law and media ethics, including Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel, and Woods’s (2012) *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning*, Patterson and Wilkins’ (2014), *Media Ethics: Issues and Cases*, and Day’s (2006) *Ethics in Media Communication: Cases and Controversies*. A number of respondents (n = 17) noted that they used case studies, reading packets, and books not from the discipline, especially Bok’s *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (1989) and *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (1999).

**Discussion**

This study provides insight and understanding of communication programs in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico and how faculty members teach courses in communication ethics. Similar to Christians and Lambeth’s (1996) study, our results revealed an increase in the number of stand-alone communication ethics courses. Christians and Lambeth found 59 programs offered communication ethics courses; whereas our study found that 99 programs offered, at least occasionally, an undergraduate communication ethics course and that 52 of those programs required it of their students. At the graduate level, we found 44 programs offered a communication ethics course. These results show an increase in the offering of communication ethics courses since Christians and Lambeth’s study in 1996. In contrast to their findings, our study revealed that the main reason for not offering a stand-alone course was the result of communication ethics curriculum being included in other courses, while Christians and Lambeth found that having a separate course in communication ethics was inspired by including it as a module in other courses.

According to NCA, communication ethics is an important cornerstone of the organization. NCA’s website states it is committed “to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication” [and] “… promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life” (What is NCA?, n.d., para. 2). While the purpose of NCA emphasizes the role of communication ethics, some of our respondents were unconvinced about the importance of communication ethics to
the communication curriculum. Nearly 20 years ago, Christians and Lambeth (1996) predicted that communication ethics might always remain marginal in the discipline of communication studies. However, they also pointed to the necessity and urgency among a growing number of communication teachers to provide instruction in critical thinking, moral reasoning, and ethical principles to ensure that students have the opportunity to explore the limits of their own thinking as well as the impact of others’ thinking on their assumptions and actions. Higher education, and communication ethics in particular, is ideally poised to intervene in students’ lives for exactly this purpose. As Zygmunt Bauman (2007) explained, communication can be an ethical endeavor that moves people out of their comfortable and uncritical zone, to consider others who are different and operate under a different set of values.

In the 21st century, communication ethics instruction is called to encourage students to explore the moral and epistemological roots of their own thinking. In doing so, students are challenged to reflect on commonly held positions of uncritical relativism on the one hand and uncritical dogmatism on the other. To continue to situate communication ethics at the center of communication instruction, there is a need for multilateral efforts from NCA and communication ethicists to educate colleagues about the historical and increasing centrality of teaching communication ethics. The communication literature offers consistent support for such efforts as well as a wealth of resources and tested techniques to facilitate and enrich instruction on the topic, as noted in Ballard et al. (2014).

Our study revealed that there is sometimes a perceived disconnect between classical ethical theory and applied or professional ethics as suggested in the ongoing debate in philosophy mentioned earlier. Christians (2008) argues that communication ethics ought to be taught from a philosophical perspective. Although the most common perspective is that of moral philosophy, our results show that, similar to Christians and Lambeth’s findings in 1996, our respondents rated “fostering moral reasoning skills” as the most important course objective. Our second most highly rated course objective, “preparing students for professional work,” was rated second to last in Christians and Lambeth’s study. This particular finding suggests the general culture of professional training that has permeated institutions of higher education in the United States in recent times is also present beyond our borders and likely influenced why respondents deem communication ethics beneficial for future job placement. However, in the communication ethics courses presently taught, the most common perspective is that of moral philosophy, consistent with Christians’ recommendations.

These findings are even more acute in light of Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, and Herzog’s (2011) discovery that 60% of emerging adults view morality as an individualistic, personal decision, and another 30% take a morally relativistic approach. Communication ethics instructors see a need to foster moral reasoning in today’s young adults, yet do so with less emphasis on classical theory (as Christians and colleagues call for) and more focus on professional ethics. Recommendations for one pedagogical emphasis over another are outside the scope of this study, but we call for more research and discussion on the tension between fostering moral reasoning and the lack of emphasis on classical theory in communication ethics pedagogy.
Consideration of moral emotions may provide an alternate way of thinking about theory (classical ethical theories) and practice (applied or professional ethics). Moral emotions are critically important to the practice of ethics (Bloom, 2013; Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, & McShane, 2006; Hoffman, 2000). Persons with damage to the empathic centers of their brain have no evidence of feelings of remorse when they decide which person must die in a moral reasoning exercise (Lough et al., 2006). Moral emotions, empathy in particular, lay an essential foundation for ethical action by stimulating moral sensitivity, creating what might be called an ethical capacity for action. Without recognition of the ethical dimension of choices, ethics will not be considered when acting. The practice of ethics involves a dynamic interplay between moral emotions, moral reasoning, and ethical frameworks or theories (Bloom, 2013). Moral emotions, not simply ethical theories or moral reasoning, help identify what is good, right, or needed in human thriving (Nussbaum, 2001). Without moral reasoning and theoretical frameworks such as those provided by moral philosophy, moral emotions may create little more than an impulse to act that begs completion and, sometimes, creates harm (Baron-Cohen, 2011; Bloom, 2013; Hoffman, 2000).

While there are a variety of pedagogical approaches for teaching communication ethics—teaching classical ethical theory, case study analysis, or service learning—it is important that faculty also provide students with theoretical frameworks that promote their reasoning and moral imagination. Moral imagination involves the capacity to consider ethical viewpoints that differ from one’s own (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994). A person familiar with a variety of ethical theories and frameworks that differ from her own ethical commitments has more resources for recognizing ethical issues and making choices, especially difficult ethical choices (Nussbaum, 1999).

The ethically responsive engagement of difference is a communication challenge in today’s globally interdependent world that calls for theoretically informed applied communication. Communication ethics scholars recognize that responsible and effective pedagogy needs to foster ethical engagement of difference (Arnett et al., 2009; Chesebro, 1969; Makau & Arnett, 1997). Both responsible and effective communication and the practical application of ethics require a communicator to engage an Other responsively, rather than focusing solely on one’s self. A speaker who focuses on herself and not her listeners, does not communicate but delivers a monologue. Similarly, the individual practice of ethics involves discerning the proper weight to place on personal self-interest relative to an Other’s self-interest, a weight that is good, right, or virtuous. Ethical practice involves taking into account Others who are different in varying ways. Communication ethics pedagogy focuses on this overlapping dimension of communication and ethics, that responsive communication and the application of ethics involve engaging with an Other, sometimes multiple Others, who are different from one’s self. Engagement of difference is integral both to responsible and effective communication ethics pedagogy and the practice of communication ethics, as evident in the award-winning *Handbook of Communication Ethics* (Makau, 2011). Theoretically informed applications for the engagement of difference, such as dialogic communication, offer students rich resources that
facilitate thinking beyond their self-interests and standpoints as they discern how to communicate in ethically challenging situations.

In terms of teaching techniques and assessments, we found other changes since Christians and Lambeth’s 1996 study. They reported that 97.7% of respondents employed case studies. By contrast, 88.5% of our respondents used case studies as assessments and 92.3% employed them as a pedagogical technique. More respondents used novels or plays (20.2%) and simulations (27.9%) in our sample than in Christians and Lambeth’s study (9.1%, 11.4%, respectively). While this finding shows that communication ethics instructors are in-sync with broader contemporary pedagogical developments, it also affirms the trusted case-study-based pedagogy. Consistent with Christians and Lambeth’s study, instructors in our sample continued to use Bok’s books, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (1999) and *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (1989). There is a wider variety of communication ethics textbooks available now, though faculty continue to use Johannesen et al.’s (2008) *Ethics in Human Communication* and Christians et al.’s (2012) *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning*. Most surprising was the number of faculty who use reading packets or web-based content, instead of a textbook. This invites further exploration to assess whether this indicates a need to rethink the traditional communication ethics textbook or if the nature of contemporary and future problems in communication ethics necessitate a mixed approach that combines traditional communication ethics texts with the more versatile content of reading packets or up-to-the-minute content often found in web-based materials. This finding points to innovation that moves communication ethics pedagogy forward.

One strength of this study is that it continues to develop and discuss the role of communication ethics within the discipline begun by Christians and his colleagues. Much of our data could be directly compared with Christians and Lambeth’s (1996) results, making it possible to assess changes in teaching communication ethics over time. Our study also cast the widest net possible for respondents by sending the survey to 906 department chairs of communication programs in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Additionally, the multiple research questions provided results of depth and detail.

The census approach was a weakness of this study as only about 20% of those surveyed responded to our invitation to participate and for some items on the survey, the response rate was much lower than 20%. However, a 20% response rate is higher than the average online survey response rate, as noted by Lozar Manfreda et al. (2008) who reported the average web survey response rate is 6–15%. Reasons for the low response rate may include the overwhelming amount of email received by department chairs, lack of a familiar sender of the survey link, or lack of interest in the survey. Lack of time could be another reason for the response rate, as the original email stated that the survey could take 10–30 minutes to complete.

Future replication of this study is warranted. Given that response rates improve when a survey is conducted on paper, it might be more effective to conduct a mail survey (Hoonakker & Carayon, 2009). The survey should be modified to include the
importance of learning objectives related to the “engagement of difference” (Arnett et al., 2009) and the role of moral emotion as well as whether or not the college or university has a religious affiliation. Additionally, future work might ask for syllabi and course assignments to conduct content analyses on the types of reading assignments and projects that undergraduate and graduate students are completing.

**Conclusion**

The study of ethics is an important part of the communication discipline. Since Aristotle, it has been viewed as essential to understanding communication processes, the sacredness of human life, and the call to ethical responsibility for the individual, organization, and community. The purpose of this research is to reflect on and extend previous studies designed to investigate the teaching of communication ethics within undergraduate and graduate programs. It seeks to illuminate current curricular and pedagogical practices. The results indicate a shift in focus with an increase in stand-alone communication ethics courses and the prioritization of moral reasoning skills. There is also an indication that, although NCA’s stance is strong toward communication ethics, individual representatives of departments have a tepid response toward its importance. These findings should provide fruitful discussions, as they are simultaneously congruent and incongruent with one another.

How we teach communication ethics has also changed through the years. Most significantly, classical ethical theory, once a cornerstone to teaching ethics, is now perceived by some faculty as less important in favor of more applied or professional preparation approaches. Yet, moral reasoning is a component of philosophical ethics and is intertwined with it. This could reflect a perceived disconnect between classical ethical theory and applied or professional ethics, which seems to suggest that classical ethical theory grounded in moral philosophy has no relationship to actual social life, but this is an inaccurate conclusion. Moral concepts within classical ethical theory are embodied in and contribute to the creation of all forms of social life (MacIntyre, 1966). Perhaps, as a discipline, a discussion regarding the philosophical underpinnings of communication ethics versus ethics in communication practice would provide insights.

Overall, understanding the current curricular trends of communication ethics, and placing those results into a historical context, allows faculty in the communication discipline to be mindful of how their choices will develop the next generation of scholars and students. As a whole, communication ethicists have steadily continued to reflect on and innovate in the area of pedagogy through their research and by offering short courses at NCA and in other venues. It is our hope that this study stimulates discussion within communication departments and within the discipline regarding the teaching of communication ethics.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Note

[1] Very small institution: fewer than 1,000 undergraduate, degree-seeking students; small institution: 1,000–2,999 undergraduate, degree seeking students; medium institution: 3,000–9,999 undergraduate, degree-seeking students; large institution: 10,000+ undergraduate, degree-seeking students).

References


