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Rhetoric and Professional Communication in the Digital Age: Reimagining Sustainable Communication Skills Pedagogy in Indian Higher Education through Digital Transformation, Ethics, and Industry–Society Integration

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Abstract

The accelerated pace of digital transformation has radically altered how communication is produced, circulated, interpreted, and evaluated across professional, institutional, and social contexts, compelling higher education systems to reassess the pedagogical foundations of communication skills training, particularly in developing knowledge economies such as India; while Indian higher education has increasingly adopted digital tools and outcome-based education frameworks, communication pedagogy continues to be largely skill-centric, fragmented, and disconnected from ethical reasoning, sustainability imperatives, and industry–society realities; this paper argues that rhetoric, understood as the art of ethical persuasion and contextual meaning-making, must be repositioned at the core of professional communication education to enable learners to navigate complex digital ecosystems responsibly and effectively; adopting a conceptual and interdisciplinary approach, the study synthesizes literature on digital rhetoric, professional communication, education for sustainable development, and Indian policy frameworks to identify critical gaps in existing pedagogical practices; the paper proposes a sustainable communication pedagogy model for Indian higher education that integrates digital transformation, ethical reasoning, and structured industry–society engagement, aligning communication education with employability, civic responsibility, and sustainable development goals; the study concludes that reimagining communication pedagogy through rhetorical consciousness is not merely pedagogical reform but a strategic necessity for fostering socially responsible professionals and inclusive digital futures.

Keywords: Digital Rhetoric, Professional Communication, Sustainable Pedagogy, Ethics, Digital Transformation, Indian Higher Education

Introduction

Communication has always been central to education, governance, and professional life, yet the digital age has profoundly transformed its nature, scope, and consequences; contemporary communication is increasingly multimodal, algorithmically mediated, instantaneous, and public-facing, blurring boundaries between personal expression, professional identity, and civic participation; in India, where higher education operates at the intersection of demographic diversity, technological expansion, and

developmental aspirations, communication skills are widely acknowledged as critical for employability and leadership, yet pedagogical approaches remain predominantly utilitarian, focusing on surface-level competencies such as presentation skills, email etiquette, or interview performance; in my opinion, such approaches underestimate the complexity of communication in digitally networked societies and fail to prepare learners for ethical dilemmas, power asymmetries, and sustainability challenges inherent in modern professional environments; this paper positions rhetoric as an integrative framework that connects digital literacy, ethical judgment, and professional communication, arguing that communication education must evolve from mechanical skill training to reflective, socially grounded pedagogy.

Classical rhetoric, far from being obsolete, offers enduring insights into persuasion, audience awareness, credibility, and ethical discourse, all of which are amplified rather than diminished in digital environments; digital platforms intensify rhetorical impact by extending reach, accelerating circulation, and embedding communication within economic, political, and technological infrastructures; professional communication in the digital age thus requires not only linguistic competence but rhetorical intelligence—the ability to analyze contexts, anticipate consequences, and negotiate meaning across diverse audiences and platforms; however, Indian higher education curricula often marginalize rhetorical theory, treating communication as an ancillary skill rather than a core intellectual practice, which weakens students’ capacity for critical engagement and responsible persuasion.

Rhetoric and Professional Communication in the Digital Context

Classical rhetoric, far from being obsolete, offers enduring insights into persuasion, audience awareness, credibility, and ethical discourse, all of which are amplified rather than diminished in digital environments; digital platforms intensify rhetorical impact by extending reach, accelerating circulation, and embedding communication within economic, political, and technological infrastructures; professional communication in the digital age thus requires not only linguistic competence but rhetorical intelligence—the ability to analyze contexts, anticipate consequences, and negotiate meaning across diverse audiences and platforms; however, Indian higher education curricula often marginalize rhetorical theory, treating communication as an ancillary skill rather than a core intellectual practice, which in my view weakens students’ capacity for critical engagement and responsible persuasion.

Digital Transformation and Pedagogical Shifts

Digital transformation in education has introduced learning management systems, AI-assisted writing tools, virtual collaboration platforms, and data-driven assessment mechanisms, offering unprecedented opportunities for experiential and learner-centered communication education; nevertheless, the mere adoption of technology does not guarantee pedagogical innovation, and without critical frameworks, digital tools risk reinforcing passive consumption, plagiarism, or algorithmic dependence; this paper argues that digital transformation must be pedagogy-led rather than technology-led, with rhetoric guiding the purposeful use of digital tools to foster critical thinking, collaboration, and ethical communication practices; in Indian higher education, where digital initiatives often prioritize scalability and access, there is a pressing need to align digital adoption with meaningful learning outcomes in communication education.

Ethics, Human Values, and Responsible Communication

The ethical dimensions of professional communication have become increasingly significant in the digital age, marked by misinformation, data surveillance, AI-generated content, and performative professionalism; ethical lapses in communication can have far-reaching consequences, affecting public trust, organizational credibility, and social cohesion; integrating ethics into communication pedagogy enables students to interrogate issues of authorship, bias, inclusivity, and accountability, cultivating moral reasoning alongside technical proficiency; Indian higher education, informed by constitutional values and humanistic traditions,

possesses a strong foundation for embedding ethics within communication education, yet in practice, ethics is often treated as a peripheral topic rather than an integral learning outcome; in my considered opinion, ethical rhetoric must be central to professional communication pedagogy to ensure that digital competence does not outpace moral responsibility.

Sustainability and Communication Education

Sustainable development is inherently communicative, relying on dialogue, advocacy, collaboration, and public engagement to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges; education for sustainable development emphasizes competencies such as critical thinking, systems awareness, and participatory communication, all of which intersect with rhetorical education; communication skills pedagogy that foregrounds sustainability enables students to understand how narratives shape public perceptions, policy decisions, and organizational practices; in the Indian context, where sustainability challenges are deeply intertwined with development priorities, communication education must prepare learners to articulate socially responsible narratives and engage constructively with diverse stakeholders.

Industry–Society Integration in Communication Pedagogy

One of the most significant gaps in communication education is the disconnect between academic instruction and real-world communication practices; industry–society integration offers a pathway to bridge this gap by embedding internships, live projects, community engagement, and industry mentorship into communication curricula; such integration allows students to apply rhetorical principles to authentic contexts, including corporate communication, public relations, governance communication, health campaigns, and digital entrepreneurship; in my opinion, sustainable communication pedagogy must move beyond simulated classroom activities to socially embedded learning experiences that reflect the ethical and professional complexities of contemporary communication work.

Indian Higher Education and Policy Alignment

National policy frameworks increasingly emphasize skill development, digital literacy, and industry collaboration, yet communication education often remains under-theorized and inconsistently implemented across institutions; aligning communication pedagogy with national development goals requires curricular coherence, faculty development, and institutional commitment to interdisciplinary learning; rhetoric provides a unifying framework that connects communication skills with critical inquiry, ethical reasoning, and societal engagement, making it particularly relevant for outcome-based and multidisciplinary education models.

Proposed Sustainable Communication Pedagogy Model

This paper proposes a four-dimensional pedagogical framework for Indian higher education comprising Digital Rhetorical Literacy, Ethical Professional Communication, Industry-Embedded Learning, and Sustainability-Oriented Civic Engagement; Digital Rhetorical Literacy focuses on analyzing platforms, audiences, and power dynamics in digital communication; Ethical Professional Communication emphasizes integrity, inclusivity, and accountability; Industry-Embedded Learning integrates experiential projects and professional mentoring; Sustainability-Oriented Civic Engagement encourages communication practices that support social responsibility and sustainable development; this model is adaptable across disciplines and institutional contexts, offering a scalable yet principled approach to communication education.

Implementing this model requires faculty capacity-building, curriculum redesign, and assessment frameworks that value reflection, ethical reasoning, and contextual analysis alongside performance; communication educators must transition from trainers of skills to facilitators of rhetorical and ethical inquiry, a shift that is essential for meaningful educational transformation.

Conclusion

Reimagining rhetoric and professional communication pedagogy in the digital age is an urgent imperative for Indian higher education, driven by technological change, ethical complexity, and sustainability challenges; this paper argues that communication education must transcend functional skill acquisition to cultivate rhetorically aware, ethically grounded, and socially responsible professionals; by integrating digital transformation with ethical reasoning and industry–society engagement, higher education institutions can position communication pedagogy as a catalyst for sustainable development and inclusive digital futures. The analysis demonstrates that prevailing skill-centric approaches inadequately address the ethical complexities, power relations, sustainability challenges, and industry–society expectations that shape digital professional communication today, thereby limiting students’ capacity for responsible participation in professional and civic life; by repositioning rhetoric as a foundational framework, this study argues that communication education can meaningfully integrate digital literacy, ethical reasoning, and contextual awareness, enabling learners to critically engage with multimodal platforms, algorithmic mediation, and persuasive practices; the proposed sustainable communication pedagogy model, encompassing digital rhetorical literacy, ethical professional communication, industry-embedded learning, and sustainability-oriented civic engagement, offers a coherent and adaptable structure that aligns communication education with employability, national policy priorities, and sustainable development goals; importantly, the paper highlights that effective implementation requires institutional commitment, faculty development, curriculum redesign, and assessment practices that value reflection, ethical judgment, and social impact alongside performance outcomes; overall, the paper concludes that cultivating rhetorically conscious, ethically grounded, and socially responsible communicators is not simply a pedagogical refinement but a strategic investment in building inclusive digital futures, strengthening democratic engagement, and supporting sustainable societal transformation in a rapidly evolving communication landscape.

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