

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Loughborough University		
Unit of Assessment: D34, Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Transforming communication training to improve engagement and experience in public, private, and third sector organizations		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Elizabeth Stokoe	Professor of Social Interaction	2002-current
Rein Sikveland	Research Associate	2014-2019
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Effective communication underpins successful organizations and even saves lives, but most communication training and guidance is not evidence-based. Loughborough University research identified communicative practices that achieve better engagement from users of public, private, and third sector services, which underpinned training using the ‘Conversation Analytic Role-play Method’ (a training approach developed at Loughborough). Training led to improvements in 1) the ability of police negotiators to bring suicide crisis negotiations to a successful outcome (<i>Metropolitan Police, Police Scotland</i>); 2) the ability of dispute resolution services, government, and court services to engage clients more effectively (<i>UK Ministry of Justice, USA Superior Court; UK Government-funded Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service</i>); 3) patient satisfaction at GP surgery receptions in England, and 4) client experience and economic success of digital technology products and services in global organizations (<i>Typeform; Toshiba</i>).</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>While most people agree that effective communication underpins many aspects of an effective organization, the communication skills industry is largely informed by popular science, self-help literature, and guru-led events, often with no scientific basis. Research conducted at Loughborough’s Centre for Research in Communication and Culture led by Stokoe identified linguistic practices that increase the effectiveness of communication between service providers and their users, across a range of organizational settings.</p> <p>Based on conversation analysis of the audio recordings of real-life conversations supplied by beneficiaries, Stokoe and colleagues showed that changing the design of a question, phrase, or word, can alter conversational trajectories and outcomes, in spoken and written communication. For example, using data collected during an ESRC-funded project on neighbour disputes (2005-2008), they began to analyse initial inquiry calls to community mediation organizations. Stokoe and colleagues found that when potential clients were asked if they were “willing” to mediate they were more likely to say “yes” than when asked if they were “interested” in mediating. They confirmed this finding by studying other types of mediation service [R1]. Findings like these were used to develop a new kind of communication training method - the ‘Conversation Analytic Role-play Method’. CARM works by taking anonymized clips of real talk from the research and playing them, line-by-line, to workshop participants. Participants can identify what works and how, based on real conversations and underpinning analysis. ESRC follow-on funding (2011-12) supported the development and testing of the training methodology. Stokoe also conducted research on traditional forms of role-play-based communication training and assessment and found that a) role-played interaction does not</p>		

reproduce real encounters and b) professionals often reproduce the tactics they are trained to use but these are ineffective in real life – meaning that CARM training was more authentic than traditional role-play [R2].

Stokoe and colleagues identified effective practices across multiple contexts, including key words and phrases that make a difference to outcomes [R3]. For example, when negotiators ask persons in crisis to “speak” to them, it is more effective than asking them to “talk”, even though they are trained to ask to “talk” [R4]. The success of the training for community mediators led to a series of research projects across public, private and third sectors. Since 2014, the research team conducted further work in a range of settings, including new mediation sectors (e.g., family mediation), cold-call sales [R3, R5], calls to doctors’ surgeries [R6], and police suicide crisis negotiation [R3, R4], based on data supplied by our beneficiaries. A key problem for many of these professionals is to engage the person they are talking to, including prospective sales clients and suicidal persons in crisis, so that the subsequent conversation has a chance of a productive outcome.

In addition to the conversational components of resistance and how to overcome it, the research team also identified key communicative practices for building relationships (or ‘rapport’, in the popular literature) and effective service provision [R5]. They have shown that what happens inside conversations is strongly associated with its outcomes. For example, when salespeople omit the ‘small talk’ at the start of conversations with prospective clients, the conversation is more likely to end with an appointment [R3]. They have also shown that the way service providers (e.g., GP receptionists) conclude calls is strongly associated with patient satisfaction scores at the national feedback level [R6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1:** Sikveland, R.O., & Stokoe, E. (2016). Dealing with resistance in initial intake and inquiry calls to mediation: The power of “willing”. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 33 (3), 235-254. DOI: 10.1002/crq.21157.
- R2:** Stokoe, E. (2013). The (in)authenticity of simulated talk: Comparing role-played and actual conversation and the implications for communication training. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 46 (2), 1-21. DOI: 10.1080/08351813.2013.780341.
- R3:** Stokoe, E., Humă, B., Sikveland, R.O., & Kevoe-Feldman, H. (2019). When delayed responses are productive: Being persuaded following resistance in conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 155, 70-82. DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2019.10.001
- R4:** Sikveland, R.O., & Stokoe, E., (2020). Should police negotiators ask to ‘talk’ or ‘speak’ to persons in crisis? Word selection and overcoming resistance to dialogue proposals. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 53 (3), 324-340. DOI: 10.1080/08351813.2020.1785770
- R5:** Humă, B., & Stokoe, E. (2020). The anatomy of first-time and subsequent business-to-business ‘cold’ calls. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 53 (2), 271-294. DOI: 10.1080/08351813.2020.1739432
- R6:** Stokoe, E., Sikveland, R.O., & Symonds, J. (2016). Calling the GP surgery: Patient burden, patient satisfaction, and implications for training. *British Journal of General Practice*, 66 (652), e779-e785. DOI: 10.3399/bjgp16X686653

The body of work was funded by competitively-awarded funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-148-25-0010; £125K, 2005-8) including follow-on funding to develop the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method’ (RES-189-25-0202; £48K, 2011-12).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Building on research findings about effective communication practice, Stokoe and colleagues developed three impact pathways:

- The **first pathway** was the ‘Conversation Analytic Role-play Method’ (**CARM**), a communication training method developed at Loughborough University with ESRC funding. CARM takes research findings about effective communication practice and presents anonymized audio extracts in real time to training participants. CARM guides people through actual instances of professional practice to see what works. CARM won a prestigious *Wired* Innovation Fellowship in 2015, enabling international visibility [S1].

- The **second pathway**, which enhanced the international visibility of CARM, comprised numerous prestigious invitations to **science communication** events, starting with an episode of BBC Radio 4's *The Life Scientific* dedicated to Prof Stokoe's research and biography (2013) which led, in turn, to an invited *TED* talk in 2014 (currently 870K views), three lectures at *The Royal Institution* between 2015-16 (currently 50K views) and other public science events around the world (e.g., at Google, Microsoft, New Scientist).
- The **third pathway** was **direct integration** of research insights into organizations' written communications via CARM consultancy work.

The international visibility of Loughborough's conversation analytic research changed public understanding of communication sufficiently to create demand for CARM's evidence-based training. As a result, CARM generated enough income between 2014-2020 to employ four PDRAs for between three months to five years each, and Prof Stokoe was invited to join the UK government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) behavioural science sub-group, as well as Independent SAGE's behaviour group. Taken together, the three pathways led to the following impacts.

1. Improved communication outcomes in suicide crisis negotiation

Research findings [R3, R4] led to changes to the language used by crisis negotiators, "challenging the training status quo" and improving communication with people in suicidal crisis [S2]. In 2015, Commander Duncan Jarrett OBE and Superintendent Chula Rupasinha from the Hostage and Crisis Negotiation Unit of the **Metropolitan Police** invited Stokoe and colleagues to work with them. The Head of UK National Training "took the rare step of releasing negotiation tapes" [S5] and we worked with their training lead to co-produce the training. In March 2017, we trained every single Metropolitan Police negotiator at their UK National Hostage course, as well as visiting attendees from regional police forces, international guests from the FBI, and from other areas of policing (e.g., **Operational Communications in Policing**). Following the training, negotiators reported better outcomes "as a direct result of the language used", and noted that the training

"has had a specific impact on our negotiations from the opening gambit and throughout the dialogue ... and help[ed] bring incidents to a swift conclusion" [S2].

On hearing about the work with the Metropolitan Police, in 2018 the Head of Border Policing Command at the Organised Crime and Counter Terrorism Unit invited Stokoe and colleagues to roll-out the training to every Police Scotland negotiator. Following the training in 2019, the heads of training and operations reported that "the research is fully embedded within negotiator training courses and materials." [S2]. The reach of the training has since extended beyond negotiators to every new officer in *Police Scotland* via the hostage and crisis unit's input into tactical communication [S2].

2. Improved engagement of potential clients of dispute resolution services

Our research enabled dispute resolution services – that provide alternatives to expensive court-based interventions – to better engage potential clients to participate in them. People in disputes often resist alternative dispute resolution services and overcoming this resistance is thus crucial to the success of dispute resolution [R1, R3]. Starting with **mediation** services, Stokoe and colleagues changed the way practitioners in mediation services dealt with initial telephone inquiries from callers to convert them into clients. By training over 4000 mediators (2014-2018) from community, family and other types of mediation, across 200 services in UK, USA and Australia, mediators adopted practices that were more likely to get clients to agree to become clients [S3]. For example, from the Board of the UK **College of Mediators**, Laura Kirkpatrick and Julie Farrell (who also founded in 2016 their own mediation service, *Solution Talk*) reported that CARM training enabled them to

"make changes when we pick up the phone [and] get people in conflict and stress to the table to negotiate or mediate" [S3].

The Chair of the UK *College of Mediators* and a CEO of **Relate**, the national marriage guidance organization (which also provides mediation), said that CARM is "acknowledged

widely in the mediation world as ground-breaking” [S3] and, because many mediators work across numerous organizations, including government task forces, the reach of this impact was extended via a UK Government campaign in 2014 to engage people in family mediation. The then **Minister of Justice**, Simon Hughes MP, invited Stokoe to join the *Family Mediation Task Force* to change how mediation is promoted and write the text for a national video, poster, and leaflet campaign [S4]. Deputy Director of Family Justice, John Hall, reported that as a “direct consequence” of Stokoe’s input” [R1, R3], the Ministry of Justice redesigned their “promotional video and related leaflets/posters” [S4]. The Ministry of Justice described this campaign as having “the best return on investment, reaching large volumes of people over the duration of the campaign.” The reach of the work was also extended internationally, as the **Superior Court for Washington DC, USA** (which serves 5.3M citizens), who had previously invited Stokoe to deliver CARM training, adopted the campaign using Stokoe’s text, creating versions for community and family mediation in English and Spanish [S4].

Furthermore, because some mediators also work with or for **Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)**, Stokoe was invited to run eight regional CARM training events between 2014-2018 and was then contracted to train every senior advisor and all internal trainers across the organization (2019-2020) – 250 conciliators across England, Wales, and Scotland [S5]. The aim was to support conciliators who “have a tough time trying to persuade people that conciliation is a worthwhile process ... we tend to find that conciliators have to repeat conversations which adds to time on the phone. And because government funding is becoming more limited over time, we must work as efficiently as possible” [S5]. ACAS’s Chief Operations Officer, working with a conciliation manager who organized all the training sessions, reported that, following the training, conciliators changed the language they used to describe services, and changed the timing of their explanations of services in initial conversations with clients, producing more “efficient and seamless” calls [S5].

3. Improved patient satisfaction with telephone inquiries to UK GP receptions

Even though all UK GP surgeries experience similar resourcing challenges, they vary greatly with regards to reported patient satisfaction. In 2015, Dr Graham Todd, responsible for Quality Improvement Science at **Health Education England**, commissioned Stokoe and colleagues to conduct research to identify best practice in patient calls to GP practices. Dr Todd supplied recordings of patient calls to four surgeries. Dr Todd reported that

“findings showed that very simple phrases and words are associated with increased patient satisfaction on the GP Patient Survey. As a practice, how our receptionists speak to patients has changed significantly.” [S6].

Based on research findings [R6] about how to meet the requests made in incoming calls to surgeries, eight CARM events took place across England, training ~80 receptionists from ~20 practices and therefore reaching ~200,000 patients. Following the training in 2017, indicators from the quarterly *GP National Survey* on key aspects of GP receptionist provision improved. The proportion of patients describing the “experience of booking an appointment” as ‘good’ increased from 76% to 95%, compared to no change across the UK during the same period. And the proportion of patients reporting that the “GP receptionist was helpful” increased from 66% to 77% in those surgeries trained, while the national picture remained constant [S6].

4. Improved client experience and economic success of digital technology products and services in global organizations

Our research on client engagement [R1, R5] was sought in 2018-19 by **Typeform**, a global ‘software as a service’ company (and iconic Silicon Valley start-up) with three million subscribers who use *Typeform’s* templates to create online surveys. *Typeform* wanted to increase the ‘conversationality’ of their product because “conversational forms are better than regular forms” and “because conversation creates a better user experience and thereby more results” [S8]. *Typeform* funded Stokoe to work with them for four months to integrate research findings about effective question design [R1-R6] into the product to “address business metrics such as completion rates and new customer registrations” [S7]. As a result of redesigning the questions in *Typeform’s* survey templates, and creating assets for marketing, design, machine learning, and customer experience teams [S7] their CEO reported in 2019 that “customers are

now enabled to increase the effectiveness of the forms in terms of completion rate” [S7]. The CEO further reported that

“the immediate beneficiary is *Typeform* itself, but the end user is the real beneficiary – our customers who are actually now creating typeforms with different templates and different guidance. Their forms are a critical part of their business process, we want to maximize their changes for as good a completion rate as possible, so that they can convert a potential new lead into a customer and then into revenue” [S7].

The same underpinning research was sought by **Toshiba Tec Imaging Systems** who identified the need for research-based rather than anecdotally driven communication training [S8]. Many businesses ‘cold call’ other businesses “as a large part of the way the technology industry generates sales” but these achieve “low percentage appointment rates” (National Sales Director, *Toshiba Tec*) [S8]. Toshiba commissioned us to identify the communication practices that led to more sales appointments [R3, R5]. Research findings underpinned subsequent CARM training for its authorised Business Partners across the UK and Ireland in 2016-17. *Toshiba’s* National Sales Director reported that, because of the training, salespersons were enabled to

“reduce call time, making calls more successful, but also enabled businesses to make more calls [and] our dealers report up to a 30% increase in appointment-making” [S8].

One of Toshiba’s sales franchises who attended the training, **Print Copy Scan**, reported that appointments “we have made over the phone have doubled, and as a result, sales have increased” [S8]. *Toshiba* reported economic benefit having “seen a 100% increase in unit sales over the last five years and Liz and her team have been a major contributor to that success” [S8].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1:** **Wired Innovation award** for CARM (2015) as part of its celebration of forward-thinking innovators who have the ‘potential to make a significant impact on the world’.
- S2:** Testimonial from **Police Scotland** (29.11.19) with appended evidence from **Metropolitan Police and Operational Communications in Policing**.
- S3:** Testimonial from **Solution Talk** (29.11.19) with incorporated evidence from **College of Mediators** and **Relate** CEO.
- S4:** Letters from various **Ministry of Justice** staff, including Rt. Hon Simon Hughes (then Minister of Justice) about family mediation (15.11.13 to 18.12.14), with **US Superior Court** testimonial appended. The first letter was in support of an ESRC Impact Prize in 2014.
- S5:** Testimonial from Chief Operations Officer and a conciliation manager at **ACAS - Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service** - (18.12.20) regarding the impact of nationwide CARM training.
- S6:** Testimonial from **Dr Graham Todd** (1.11.19), responsible for Quality Improvement Science at **Health Education England**, regarding GP reception practice training, with evidence of increased satisfaction from patients appended.
- S7:** Testimonial from **Typeform** (13.8.19) regarding embedding research into software products.
- S8:** Testimonial from **Toshiba Tec** (November 2019) with appended evidence of sales appointment increases from **Print Copy Scan**.