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Limitations of Communication

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“No one would talk much in society if they knew how often they misunderstood others.”

John Wolfgang Goethe

As college teachers we have a responsibility to communicate to our students, not only for content which leads to understanding the subject matter we teach, but also to motivate and engage students to want to learn that content. Our student body is changing rapidly. Many of us teach not only “first generation” college students, but students that reflect our country’s diversity as well. To be more effective communicators we need to better understand the communication dynamics this change imposes on us. At the University of Texas at Tyler we keep data on our graduation rates for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. The data raises serious questions as to our institution’s effectiveness for the retention and graduation of minority students. (see Fig. 1)

There are many reasons that explain low graduation and retention rates not the least of which is economic. Students from disadvantage backgrounds remain a source of concern. In a recent article, (Stevens, 2013, p. 254) found that the disparity in test scores among minorities and poor students results from a history of underfunded educational programs at the Pre-K and elementary levels. In spite of remediation and intervention programs, students who enter high school unprepared will not achieve success on AP examinations. Robert Tai reminds us that using Advanced Placement programs as a means of achieving educational equity is similar to the approach taken by Affirmative Action. Stanley Arnowitz argued that “affirmative action,…has distracted the public from addressing the true problem: festering educational inequities (Tai, p. 42).” For many of our best students remaining in school is a constant struggle. But, we also believe that communication styles play a role in this problem. This paper will discuss the limitations to effective communication. Two areas: the human dimension and the technological dimension will be presented.

To begin, communication is the ability to communicate in a personally effective and socially appropriate manner or what we term communication competence (Ippolito, 2014). What we will address are the barriers to this positive definition of communication. Three barriers immediately come to mind: 1.barriers to listening, 2. barriers to accurate perceptions and 3.barriers to effective verbal communication.

Over 75% of executives believe that critical thinking skills will be more important to their organizations in the next three to five years (AMA 2010 Critical Skills Survey). CEOs surveyed by the American Management Association indicated that 81% considered innovation the single most important factor to ensure the future success of their business (U.S. Council on Competitiveness). “To succeed in college, undergraduates should be able to...listen with comprehension,” writes Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation (1987, p.73). Employers have identified listening as one of the top three skills they seek in job applicants, as well as a major determinant in promotion. In spite of these observations few undergraduates have the opportunity to develop listening skills as a fundamental ability for learning. Studies in the area of listening reveal just how complicated the task is. First, there is no agreement on what listening is nor is there agreement on how to teach it if you believe it is a skill. “In their key 1997 study, for example, listening experts Witkin and Trochim identified 15 separate groups of listening behaviors including such diverse variables as attention, analysis, auditory,
acuity, empathy, and information processing. No wonder, then, that it has been difficult for communication scholars to agree on a single definition of listening (Thompson, et al, 2004, p. 256)."

Groshek and Thompson, (1994) compiled a list of expectations faculty had of their students. We believe these expectations are based on assumptions that need to be questioned today.

Generally come to college equipped with foundational skills in listening. Come to classes prepared to listen; that is, they have read the material, understand the vocabulary, and have a basic understanding of subject matter to be discussed.

Have conceptual skills necessary to fulfill such classroom expectations as analysis, problem-solving, and social interaction.

Are open-minded about subject matter and other’s perspective.

Have good observational skills of verbal and non-verbal communication and can record and report their observations accurately.

Are intellectually “present” throughout communication events in the classroom and remain focused on subject matter activities.

Have the ability to “shift contextual gears”; they know they have to listen differently in philosophy class, versus listening in math class, versus listening in small group discussion class versus listening to friends at lunch.

It is no wonder our students don’t seem to hear what we are saying, and, conversely perhaps we don’t hear as well either. In addition, “add to this the complications of listening to knowledge, which is often abstract, and the fact that we are listening to people from a variety of cultures, and the stage may be set for more changes in our listening behaviors (Bentley, 2000, p. 130).” Not only are there impediments to listening but also there are limitations to student’s perceptions.

A.D. Smith reminds us in his article, Perceptions and Belief, that “In the normal course of things, perceivers tend to believe that the world is the way they perceive it to be (2001, p. 284).” In other words they believe that what they perceive is actually true. This position falls flat when we consider an optical illusion. A mirage does not necessarily imply that we will find water. In the same way that the medieval world believed that the world was flat was a perception not an objective belief any of our students as well as ourselves act according to what we perceive to be correct. This condition easily leads to stereotyping and generalization. The term “stereotype,” coined in 1798 by the French printer Dinot referred to a printing process to create reproductions. Walter Lippmann, a journalist used the term likened stereotypes to, “pictures in the head,” or mental reproductions of reality (Plous, p.1).” Many people upon hearing the stereotype Goth might immediately think of black clothes, black make-up, depressed or hated by society. This refers to an individual but we also have common stereotypes of a particular group of people or nation.

Stereotypes are not only harmful because they inevitable lead to prejudice and discrimination, but also because as a misperception it is incongruent with reality. A clear case of this is generalizing about Latinos as opposed to Mexican Americans. Cubans, Puerto Ricans, El Salvadorians, West Indians, etc. all have different cultural expectations and belief systems. By not understanding these subtle and not so subtle differences we fall prey to misunderstanding the students we teach.
Following the Holocaust, several theorists investigated the roots of racism, anti-Semitism, and prejudice. Theodor Adorno concluded that the key to key to prejudice lay in one’s personality; his description, the “authoritarian personality.” “Adorno and his coauthors (1950) described authoritarians as ridged thinkers who obey authority, saw the world as black and white, and enforced strict adherence to social rules and hierarchies (Plous, p.3).” In spite of criticism of their work, three elements were correct. (1) a politically conservative form of authoritarianism, known as “right- wing authoritarianism,” does correlate with prejudice. (2) People who view the world hierarchically are more likely than others to hold prejudices toward low-status groups. (3) Social dominance orientation tends to correlate with prejudice even more strongly than right-wing authoritarianism, and studies have linked it to anti-Black and anti-Arab prejudice, sexism, nationalism, opposition to gay rights, and other attitudes concerning social hierarchy.

Consistent with research on prejudice, psychological studies have found that stereotyping is a natural and common process in cultures around the world (Plous, p.14). Many studies suggest that stereotypes can powerfully affect social perception and behavior. People who are stereotyped face a threat that their behavior will confirm a negative stereotype. Steele and his colleagues describe this behavior as “stereotype threat” and state that it creates anxiety and hampers performance on a variety of tasks. (Steele, 1997) They provide several examples; Female math students taking a difficult test show a drop in performance when told the test reveals gender differences in math ability. Another study found that Asian women were made aware of their ethnicity, their math performance improved (in keeping with the stereotype of Asians as good at math) but when made aware of their gender, their math performance declined.

A troubling aspect of stereotyping is that it easily leads to discrimination. In spite civil rights legislation discrimination remains a serious problem. Here a few examples:

According to a review of more than 100 studies by the U.S. institute of Medicine, discrimination contributes to racial disparities in health care and higher death rates among minorities from cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and H.I.V. infection (Smedley, Stith & Nelson, 2002)
Hispanics and Blacks spend an average of over $3,000 more than Whites to locate and buy the same house (Yinger, 1998), often receive harsher criminal sentences than Whites for the same offense (Mauer, 1999), and are generally less likely to be hired than comparable White job applicants (Turner, Fix, & Struyk, 1991).

Women earn an average of $.76 for every male dollar (Bowler, 1999) and face employment discrimination of such magnitude that recent settlements have run into the hundreds of millions of dollars (Molotsky, 2000; Truell, 1997).

A U.S. Justice Department found that handicap –access provisions for disabled people were violated in 98% of the housing developments investigated (Belluck, 1997).

What strategies can we employ for our students to help them reduce their level of discrimination? First, we must recognize the difficulty in reducing discrimination. One of the major barriers to this is the difficulty people have detecting it at the individual level. It is difficult for us to serve as our own control group to test whether we would have received better treatment as a member of a more privileged group. It is much easier to
detect discrimination with aggregated evidence than a single case because single cases are more difficult to explain away. And, many of us may deny discrimination because we may not have any control of the situation. As a result of these and other reasons, women and minorities are more likely to perceive discrimination against their group than against themselves personally (Crosby, 1984; Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1994). Now that we have presented a survey of the human dimension to communication, we will discuss implications for the technological dimension of communication.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is defined as a “wide range of technologies facilitating both human communication and the interactive sharing through computer networks.” CMC is linked with digital literacy, asynchronous learning and the removal of face-to-face communication.

Notwithstanding the significant attention and literature devoted to technology and education, there appears to be comparatively little empirically sound research upon which policy makers might base informed decisions. By empirically sound we mean research that addresses testable hypotheses using experimental or quasi-experimental methods, subjecting the data to appropriate statistical treatment, and drawing conclusions consistent with the purposes and methods employed.

Computer-mediated world-wide networks have enabled a shift from contiguous learning groups to asynchronous distributed learning groups utilizing computer-supported collaborative learning environments. Although these environments can support communication and collaboration, both research and field observations are not always positive about their workings.

Collaborative learning leads to deeper level learning, critical thinking, shared understanding, and long term retention of the learned materials (e.g. Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). It also provides opportunities for developing social and communication skills (developing social and communication skills), developing positive attitudes towards co-members and learning material, and building social relationships and group cohesion (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 1999).

[We] cannot truly transform educational practice for the better through utilizing new technologies unless we examine the roles computer (technology) can play in truly stimulating, supporting and favoring innovative learning interactions that are linked to conceptual development and improvements in understanding (Ravenscroft, 2001. P.134)

Gilbert and Moore (1998) argue that “social interaction between students and teachers and teachers between students and students can have little to do with instructional learning, but can help create a positive (or a negative) learning environment” (p.30). Similarly Northrup (2001) contends that through social interaction “the opportunity for learning more about peers and connecting them in non-task specific conversation is more likely to occur. Although social interaction may have very little to do with a course, it is still valued as a primary vehicle for student communications in a Web-based learning environment” (p.32). Rovai (2001) lent support to these hypotheses when he found evidence that “community was stronger in the program that provided learners more and diverse {non-task} opportunities to interact with each other and that the most important community components in which groups differed were spirit and trust” (105).
Interpersonal effects of using computer-mediated communication include (social psychological and organizational communications research report negative effects of CMC on impression formation and relational communication behavior) (e.g. Rice, 1993; for a review see Garton & Wellman, 1995; Walter et al., 1994). One of the factors contributing to impression formation is the exchange of nonverbal cues conveying socio-emotional and affective information. These cues are usually transmitted by vision (e.g. facial expressions, posture, gaze and gestures), olfaction (e.g., use of Cologne/perfume, body odor), and/or audition (e.g. voice volume, inflection and tone). Based on these cues, learners develop individualizing impressions of fellow group members. Since CMC is text based, it cannot transfer this kind of information. Short et al. (1976) note that in “most cases, the functions of the non-verbal cues have been some way related to forming, building or maintaining the relationships between the reactants. The absence of the visual channel reduces possibilities for expression of the socio-emotional materials and decreases the information available about the others self-image, attitudes, moods and reactions. So regarding the medium as an information transmission system, the removal of the visual channel is likely to produce a serious disturbance of the affective interaction…” (p. 59-60).

Students who have excellent teachers and adequate resources do indeed have a better chance for success. I begin each semester on the first day of all my Communication classes, albeit a course regarding the Fundamentals of Communication, Presentational Speaking for Business and Professional or an Introduction to Communication course with a bold and truthful statement. I actually make each student aware on the first day of class that they walked through the door of my classroom as fully skilled, competent and capable communicators. I explain that it is very obvious to me that they possess these practical communication skills or they would not have been able to select the course, register, find and be in attendance in the classroom at the designated time. Their communication skills have for all practical instances, up to this time, served them all well and good.

However, this chapter nor this course is not about what most students or you the reader assume what effective communication is really all about. Yes, they and you, are about to embark upon a journey to rediscover the significance and the value of communication.

In order to demonstrate our approach we want you to hear what one of our Tyler Junior College students said about these principals. Sean Fitzpatrick, a sophomore wrote the following essay. We couldn’t have expressed it better.

**What I learned in Mr. I’s First Class**

**The 10 “I isms”**

The first things that Mr. I emphasized to the class and to myself is the fact that Mr. I is not my teacher but rather Mr. I is my coach. It appears to me that there are few things touching upon effective business communication in general and speech making/delivery that can be effectively taught; certainly general principles can be conveyed but the most effective way to learn is to do. In addition when a speech is given the experience has the potential to edify in more ways than merely the conveyance of information: first, it can bolster the confidence of the speaker insomuch as the realization that the occurrence is survivable; second, for those who witness the
oration can garner tips on how to improve their own technique; third, the constructive critique of the listeners is helpful for the speaker insomuch as to point out weaknesses and places of improvement that were heretofore unknown; and forth, the expert advice of the coach will offer the most amount of assistance for those of us with little or no practical public speaking familiarity.

The second principle that I learned in Mr. I's class is that he does everything for a reason and it is my job to discern what he is doing and why. It occurs to me the reason for this exercise is to improve my observational and critical thinking skills. If I take note of something that is entirely outside the realm of my understanding, I am presented with a unique opportunity to strive fervently to achieve comprehension; allowing for the provision that Mr. I is acting purposefully.

The third 'I ism' taught by Mr. I is that he does not like to assume (Ass-U-Me). If assumptions are made, potential limitations are unjustly placed upon people and sources of information. If I assume I can limit my experiences and my own growth.

The fourth principle that I learned in Mr. I's first class is that he cannot make me happy, or sad. This makes sense as these emotions are eminently transient and fleeting. Further to that notion, only the individual has the ability to achieve happiness or sorrow insomuch as they are reactionary emotions (e.g. a great experience or a personal tragedy) and even those are affected by how we chose to process each instance.

The Fifth truth impressed upon me by Mr. I is that it is his job to see that I am successful. This is the salient point of the entire class. Effective communication is essential in a myriad of professions and personal instances. Even if public speaking does not even enter into what is to be attempted in the future by me (notwithstanding that I expect that it will), learning how to properly communicate an idea to groups ranging from two to two-hundred will be invaluable to any achievement that I set out to accomplish.

The sixth truth that Mr. I said in his first class was that to be an effective communicator I must have compassion, empathy, humility, and respect. In regards to this class it makes sense to display all these attributes. We are to be compassionate insofar as we all need to be sympathetic to how nervous and uneasy people can get even addressing a small audience; empathic inasmuch as we know that each of us has to do the same thing. We need to remain humble for our own sake, so as according to the well known proverb, “pride comes before a fall”, and for the sake of the others who will be speaking, so as to avoid causing unnecessary discomfort for those who are already scared enough. The last trait, respect, should remind us to show respect for our own efforts so as to give it all that we can and to respect the works of others and give them our full attention.

The seventh “I ism” is to “Be Aware.” Indubitably, I may be missing some deeper arcane meaning; however, whenever there is a question, always remember Isim number two, “Mr. I does everything for a reason...” The best I can recall in my understanding, to be aware is to further sharpen the skill of observation. This seems essential in both giving and listening to a speech. After all, if during your oration you fail to notice that you are boring your audience to death chances are you will fail to understand how you can improve and more effectively convey information. Also, if you
are not aware while observing someone else’s address, your chances of improving by example diminish dramatically.

The eighth principle that Mr. I said is that he likes to “peal the onion.” This form of examination is undoubtedly meant to encourage us to look deeper into subjects. That will help us form a more complete picture and a superior speech.

The ninth principle underlined by Mr. I was the secret of public speaking was understanding power. It occurs to me that power, in this instance refers to the potential that each one of us has to be a great orator.

The tenth I’ism taught in Mr. I’s first class was that this class was all about me. I am the only one who can accomplish victory. I am the only one who can achieve success. No one will do it for me.

Conclusions: Pointers for Future Research and Practice

It is clear from our research that we as teachers need to view our roles differently. We need to continue to teach our disciplines for content and analytical knowledge as we always have but we must also take into account the needs of our students as well. This will involve perhaps a different way of evaluating our performance to include more emphasis on rapport and engagement. And, finally with increased use of technology planning becomes essential.

Ronald Ferguson, of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and the late John Ogbu studied the achievement gap in suburban schools. Both researchers garnered similar results, though different in emphasis. “For Ferguson, the role of the teacher and the school is to encourage the individual student to meet the demands of academic work by changing classroom practices. For Ogbu, students will perform better and be more engaged in school if they are helped to modify parts of their collective identity that reject school success, through caring individual and institutional practices (Flaxman,).”

Following recommendations both researchers suggest “because students value and respond to encouragement, teachers need to provide it routinely and teachers need to recognize that their expectations have an effect on their student’s concept of themselves as learners and achievers and the internalization of negative or positive beliefs about their intelligence. Educational disparity may be a result of teacher's attitudes and the pervasive influence of a history of segregation than of intellectual differences ascribed by some. In other words, we must invite all students into our classroom, expect high standards, and treat them with compassion, empathy, humility and respect.
References


Figure 1
Percent of First-Time, Degree-seeking Freshman Who Earn a Baccalaureate Degree within Six Academic Years

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