Models of Communication

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The Discipline of Communication

Communication has been studied for centuries - in fact some of the earliest writings on communication are credited to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle also wrote and spoke about science, math, and government. As a formal discipline of study in higher education, communication is a relatively new field. Communication Studies began as a discipline of study in the 1970s which by academic history qualifies it as a "newer" discipline in higher education. The traditional fields of study in higher education (math, science, law, and religion) date back to 1243 when Pope Innocent IV declared Universatas were to be established throughout the Roman empire. The earliest higher education institutions in the United States included Harvard (1636) and the College of William and Mary (1693) which focused on the study of religion, law, math, and science. When you look at those dates, it's not hard to understand why communication is considered a "newer" discipline in higher education.

In the 1960s, the United States was deeply involved in the Vietnam Conflict. I'm sure you've heard about the protests surrounding the United States involvement in the war - and the resulting "hippie" movement. A lot of the protests were organized by college students and faculty from across all disciplines in higher education. So, there were English faculty, math faculty, and psychology faculty coming out of their academic silos to protest the war. These protests would often involve traveling for many hours together or participating in sit-ins for long time periods. When groups of academics get together, what do you think they talk about? They talk about what they research and teach in their discipline! When all this interdisciplinary communication happened, university faculty began to realize that there were many faculty members who were studying communication across a variety of disciplines. English faculty were teaching about how communication happens on the written page and were researching the written language throughout history by studying ancient texts, medical faculty were teaching about the physical aspects of how sound is formed through vocal cords, sociology faculty were teaching about how cultures communicate their identity from one generation to another through storytelling, psychology faculty were teaching about how an individual communicates her identity to another, and law faculty were teaching about effective persuasive communication to win a legal case. As a result of the Vietnam Conflict, faculty across higher education began to communicate outside their chosen disciplines with other professionals studying communication. This resulted in the "new" interdisciplinary field of study known as Communication Studies.

Today, most four-year institutions in higher education have a communication department where students can study communication or a particular area of communication. Some of the oldest communication departments are referred to as rhetoric departments. Rhetoric is a term that was coined by Aristotle and it means the study of persuasion.

By modern higher education standards, the study of communication is one of the "hot" fields to major in because of the diverse career tracks a communication major can go into. Communication majors regularly enter fields such as broadcasting or mass media, counseling, public relations, theater, film,
journalism, business, education, government, speech pathology, law, and a variety of international fields. Pretty much any career field requires communication skills!

In fact, if you look at your local newspaper in the classified section listing the “help wanted” ads, the top two things that employers are looking for are “excellent communication and math skills!” Therefore, your study of communication in this course can be a true skill building experience that you can use as you apply for future jobs!

**Definition of Communication**

In 1976, two researchers by the names of Larson and Dance, identified 126 different definitions of communication! I don't think it's necessary to learn all 126 for this course, so we'll use the textbook definition of communication. *Find the definition!* Be sure to look at how the definition is broken down to include: process, systemic, symbols, and the two meanings!

**Action or Linear Model of Communication**

In 1948 (notice the date is much earlier than the 1970s), Harold Laswell was a psychologist who made a model of what happens in basic communication and he titled it *Action Model of Communication*. Some refer to this as the linear model of communication. The model had a *sender* and a *receiver* with an arrow pointing from the sender to the receiver. The arrow demonstrated the direction a *message* travels from the person who starts the communication (the sender) to the person who receives the communication (the receiver). Imagine the model this way, I have a ball that I throw to you and then you take the ball and walk away. Game over! How fun of a game was that? As simple as the Action or Linear model is, Laswell's model was considered groundbreaking in the psychology field.

**Interaction Model of Communication**

As quickly as Laswell's Action model was in print, other professors who focused on communication determined that his model was just too simplistic - it wasn't realistic to what happens when two people communicate because messages don't just travel in one direction. Messages travel back-n-forth between the sender and receiver. In 1955, Wilbur Schramm published the *Interaction Model of Communication* which included *feedback*, or the response a sender receives from the receiver about her message. Basically, the model is like this game: I throw the ball to you, you catch it and throw it back to me. Game over! Fun, huh?
Transaction Model of Communication

As fast as the Action or Linear Model became outdated, Schramm’s Interaction model was replaced by the Transaction Model of Communication. Basically, the Action Model and the Interaction Model were too simplistic of models for people who study human communication – they weren’t dynamic enough! The Transaction Model has been adapted by several professionals over the year across several academic disciplines. The Transaction Model is the most complex model of communication and provides an excellent visual of the communication process.

The sender and receiver we had in Laswell’s Action model are now shown as simultaneous beings in the Transaction model because we know that we don’t just throw one message and wait for another to come back - we send and receive messages at the same time. I may say something to you but my body language may say something else entirely. The transaction model was the first model to acknowledge non-verbal communication or all those great facial expressions and body language components of communication. Feedback from Schramm’s model can be either verbally or nonverbally delivered in the Transaction Model.

The message travels through a channel in the Transaction Model. The channel is the method or mode of how the communication passes between the participants. Common channels include the telephone, fax machine, or internet.

The model also includes noise which is any interference which can occur during the communication process. Interferences may be internal or external. Internal noise would include anything internal to the body or mind - things like a hungry stomach or a headache which might interfere in participating in the communication. External noise would include anything environmental which might infringe upon the communication - like a noisy train going by or a car honking.
The last component of the model is context. **Context** is the environment the communication takes place in. For instance, as I'm saying this to you, my context is my office at the college - I'm surrounded by books, resources, and music is playing. What context are you receiving the message in? If we were in the same location, the context would be the same?

### Hierarchy of Communication

As complex as the Transaction Model is, it shouldn't be surprising that those who study communication tend to specialize in one area of communication. I like to think of the entire discipline of communication as a giant pyramid - just like those found in Egypt. Let's create the following pyramid together:

![Hierarchy of Communication Diagram]

With any pyramid, there needs to be a solid foundation. The foundation of all communication is **intrapersonal communication** - or the communication that happens inside ourselves. Yes, we all talk to ourselves! This is one course where it's okay to acknowledge the "voices in your head!" *Label the bottom step Intrapersonal.*

A step up the pyramid is **interpersonal communication** or the communication that happens between two people. This might be between you and a friend or you and a lover. Now, the higher up the pyramid we go, there is still the solid foundation underneath us. So, while I am talking with my friend or pillow talk with my lover, the "voices in my head" are still going on. We may be chatting about the weather but I'm thinking about how hungry I am or if he likes me! *Label the step above Intrapersonal as Interpersonal.*

The next level up the pyramid is **group communication** or communication between 3-5 people. Some researchers say that a small group could be up to 25 people but personally, I don't consider 25 people a "small" group! Can you imagine taking 25 people to the movies and everybody agreeing on what to see? Let's stick with 3-5 people for our example. Imagine three friends going to the movies. They are sitting and waiting for the start of the movie chatting. Two break off into their own subject leaving one eating
his popcorn with only the voices in his head. He's still part of the three-some even though he isn't participating in the conversation. The three can break down to two plus one, and yet all of them have the voices in their head - or the foundation happening. See how this works? Label the step above **Interpersonal as Group Communication.**

Above group communication is **organizational communication** or communication among several groups who are all trying to achieve the same goal. Think about a large company with several branches - a manufacturing branch, a marketing branch, and a development branch. The company is selling a product and the 100 employees are broken down into the various branches depending upon their expertise but they all have the same goal: to sell the product. Inside each branch will be smaller groups and pairs, and everyone has the voices in their head going no matter what division or group or pair they are involved in. Label the step above **Group Communication, Organizational Communication.**

We are approaching the top of the pyramid - only three levels to go and we already have a ton of people and perspectives that happen in communication! Above organizational communication is **societal or cultural communication** or the communication that happens within or between cultural groups. Societal or cultural communication is often broken into intracultural and intercultural communication. **Intracultural communication** would be communication that is between groups operating within a dominate culture - like African Americans communicating with Amish Americans inside the culture of the United States. **Intercultural communication** is even more complex as it is between different international cultures - like the representative of each country in the United Nations! Inside the cultures are organizations, groups, pairs, and everyone has a voice in their head! Label the step above **Organizational Communication as Societal Communication.**

Above societal communication is **public communication** or the communication that happens when a small group or individual sends messages to a large group in a formal setting - like a lecture, speech, or the State of the Union address. The speaker(s) can see the audience which is composed of cultures, organizations, groups, pairs, individuals, etc. Label the step above **Societal Communication as Public Communication.**

At last we are at the top of our communication pyramid - the **pinnacle!** The most complex type of communication is **mass communication.** This is where one person or a small group of people sends messages to an audience they cannot see. The audience is anonymous and heterogeneous (mixed). Mass communication would include radio, TV, Internet, and various publications. The message makers cannot see the audience but they may be in a formal setting (like a school) receiving the message, or in from a variety of cultures, or in an organization, or in a group, or in a pair. No matter what, they all have the foundation of the pyramid happening. No matter how they send or receive the message, the voices in their heads are all happening!

We also include **social media** in the mass communication level of the pyramid. Some researchers are calling this area digital media rather than mass communication. Even though much of our social media is interpersonal communication, we never really know who is on the receiving end of our messages. The highest security settings on Facebook won’t protect strangers from seeing our posts. While you think you are Snapchattting or Instagramming with your bestie, you can never really be sure it is that person
responding or that your bestie isn’t letting someone read over their shoulder what you are sharing. We don’t always see the person in their photos, or the entire environment the person is in while chatting on Facetime or Messenger. Social media is changing and evolving so quickly that we don’t know really know where it will lead in the study of communication. It may be that the next version of a communication pyramid will have an entire layer devoted just to social media.

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