

Chapter 1: Thinking about Communications

IN THE CLASSROOM

Not so long ago, Communications was considered almost a remedial course—for those with weaker language skills, who needed help integrating into school and work life. Not so today. If you are new to teaching Business/Professional Communications, it may be useful to start by considering, at least briefly, the nature of the enterprise.

What is Communications in this context? As you can see from a glance through *Impact*, the curriculum encompasses a broadly cross-disciplinary approach, including elements of writing theory and practice, rhetoric, media, linguistics, cultural studies, psychology, organizational behaviour theory, and effects of information technology.

Students may be confused by the term itself—Communications—which is now the catch-all buzz-word of the Information Age, so much so as to become overblown and vague.

Let's clarify. One way of defining Communications is as the art—and craft—of creating unambiguous language. It is all about concise language use. Whereas in literary realms, ambiguity often has a special, poetic value, in professional writing/communicating, the goal is to “get your message across” and to motivate readers through increasingly complex barriers that block understanding and meaning in our information-saturated, multi-cultured world.

Communications, in our context, is results-oriented writing and speaking. In the process of achieving that goal with your students, you will, no doubt, develop definitions of your own.

RESPONSES AND SAMPLE ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

1. This will depend on the material. Students should focus on elements that build morale and group identity, plus a climate of trust through easy access, etc.
2. Good cartoon and comic strips to analyze in terms of communications are “Betty” and “Adam” (especially on gender and relations between the sexes) and “Dilbert” (on digital and electronic workplace culture). Also consider web comics like “User Friendly” for workplace communication barriers with a geek slant. *The New Yorker* offers many insightful cartoons on the communications process from a variety of angles.
3. For example, a computer programmer would need to be able to translate highly technical language into plain terms; an affirmative action worker would need strongly developed interpersonal and cross-cultural communications skills, and so on.
4. Non-verbal clues suggest:
 - a) The client is signaling boredom or impatience; you need to clarify what she needs from this exchange.
 - b) This could be the boss, or someone with a hidden disability; the new employee needs to show team spirit and sensitivity by responding as the group does.

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- c) He/she is disbelieving, or is “putting you down”; she should express positive body language (e.g., nodding) that would encourage dialogue. But since she is indicating dissent, you should try to open discussion to let her air her viewpoint.
 - d) He is putting you in a subordinate place, creating distance; since he is showing a need to assert authority, you can probably put him at ease by acknowledging his authority through words and body language.
 - e) This will be confidential. To ease the manager's tension and establish the parameters of the meeting, clarify your issue up-front as succinctly as possible.
 - f) She is uneasy or anxious, or both; as the interviewer you may wish to create a friendlier atmosphere to get a fuller sense of this applicant's abilities. Also consider affirming the positive points of her resume.
 - g) He is resisting your overture; respect his boundaries and find a different way to approach.
 - h) She is angry, embarrassed, and resentful; you need to privately revisit your relationship with this employee and have a frank, open discussion about hurt feelings and her importance to the team.
 - i) Assuming the worksite isn't noisy enough to obstruct the supervisor's hearing, he may be indicating that discussing a possible health hazard isn't appropriate in a public venue—you should reintroduce your query about the email in private.
5. The mirroring techniques used may be identified as:
- a) reflecting feelings
 - b) clarifying
 - c) paraphrasing
 - d) summarizing
6. Below are some examples of draft questions:
- a) So what kind of flexibility do we have on the deadline?
 - b) Could you extend the deadline for a first draft?
 - c) Is it really necessary to have such a fast turnaround on this report when you've already burdened me with so much extra work?
 - d) Would it be a problem if the report came in a week late?
 - e) Does the report have to be done today, and why do I have to do it, anyway?
- Of these choices, a) is likely to be the most effective, unless the power relationship makes b) the only possible option. a) should encourage a dialogue and a sense of shared responsibility in the decision-making process, while b) suggests a straightforward appeal to a superior's authority — that is, with b) you request permission. c) could promote dialogue, but has a somewhat weasely tone, as it seems to suggest that a threat could get the task completed on time. d) sounds resentful and self-excusing, never a good employee profile to promote, while e) creates confusion by linking two distinct issues.
7. To determine maturity/self-awareness, a useful question might be: “What have supervisors tended to criticize you for in previous jobs?” To measure “team player”

mentality: “What kind of people do you most/least enjoy working with?” To test loyalty: “Where do you see yourself in two years time?” To analyze leadership ability: “What was the most satisfying group project you have initiated to date, and why?”

8. This will depend on circumstances and the students; encourage the students to look for “the three Cs”—coherence, completeness, and clarity (particularly in terms of headings and other essential points). Also, personal observations and details always help to make any information stand out and be more memorable; encourage the students to jot down their own ideas with regards to the implications of the content presented.
9. Colour is an obvious factor in how a room makes us feel, though we may not always be aware of its influence. Ditto space: e.g., a windowless room may cause distracting feelings of claustrophobia. Classrooms with fixed furnishings like labs impede group work. And so on. Ultimately, students should be able to see the direct correlation between the physical appearance of a room and how it makes them feel. Perhaps someone in the class has some insights from the world of Feng shui.
10. Again, this will depend on your chosen samples. Most advertising plays on basic human concerns: e.g., safety, sex, status, etc.. An interesting trend is “green” or eco-advertising, which often appears, ironically enough, in very anti-environmental products such as highly packaged cosmetics—causing semantic dislocation.
11. The point here is to make students consciously aware of how communication styles and structures have an impact on them, and to keep these observations in mind in order to improve their own communications style. To this end, it is worthwhile to encourage a deeper, more thoughtful response; that is, stress that the answers (e.g., determining levels of formality or the import of communication on the job) aren’t always straightforward, depending on circumstances.
12. For example, decentralization may increase the amount of communication and may also change the levels of formality as new hierarchies are established; increased competition from China could decrease communication as companies go for a leaner, less discursive business style. On the other hand, greater job security tends to promote more open communication, as people feel more confident. Multicultural goals should increase the amount of communication as content becomes increasingly diverse and as understanding the nuances of that content becomes more challenging. Suspicion, on the part of the public, might create a need for fuller disclosure, increased public relations, and so on.
13. In exploring the dynamic nature of the speaker-listener exchange, there are several interesting points for students to pick up on. One is the notion of personal and/or professional bias, meaning people are not generally open to viewpoints that oppose their own. Another is the complex nature of listening itself; it is useful to realize that in evaluating the speaker, the listener might be less likely to grasp as much of the speaker’s actual meaning. One might call it “listening with only one ear.”

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14. Generally, small organizations can afford to have more informal communications, less hierarchy, less documentation, and more upward communication. The larger the company, the more prevalent downward communication becomes; complex organizations are almost always strongly hierarchical, and, if functioning effectively, rely on lateral communication to keep activities coordinated.
15. This scenario allows students to look at the bigger picture: How can they suggest improvements without insulting or putting down other members of the team and the person they are submitting their suggestion to? When offering an alternative way to handle a problem or improve a process, it is important to anticipate any counterarguments and have solutions ready to offer. A well-rounded and rationale solution that stresses the advantages to the change will always fare better than a solution that does not address the short-term and long-term consequences of any change that can affect teamwork, productivity, and employee satisfaction.

ONLINE NOTE

In the **Internet Issues** section, five key guidelines for email use are delineated: remember the human side, be succinct, avoid short-form symbols, pay attention to appearance, and consider privacy. To emphasize the importance of these steps, try, as a class, to design the worst email possible (i.e. which forgets the human receiver, is not succinct, bristles with emoticons, is poorly formatted and filled with language errors, and contains revealing personal information). The key question to ask is, while email has improved communications in a multitude of ways, are there other ways in which it hinders communication on a human level?

FURTHER EXERCISES — FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

1. Given that “the pen is mightier than the sword” have students discuss written statements or larger literary works that have significantly affected them. What was it about the message itself or the way it was conveyed that left a lasting impression?
2. List the formal communication systems that exist in your own institution. Then list the components of the more informal, student network.
3. From the lists above, which systems do you rely on for these kinds of information:
 - a) important dates (e.g., registration, withdrawal)
 - b) assignment due dates
 - c) social events
 - d) program requirements
 - e) getting in touch with an instructor
 - f) quality of a particular program or teacher
 - g) good places to eat off campus
4. Non-verbal communication can reinforce or contradict a spoken message. Brainstorm examples of both situations. Or role-play a mock job interview involving several

students; then analyze the use of body language, eye contact, the impact of furniture, of space, of windows, etc. Do the same portraying a sales pitch for a new product, involving a young, charismatic salesperson and (very traditional) company managers.

5. For each of the statements, “mirror” the speaker’s words by first paraphrasing, second clarifying, and third, reflecting feelings. Here is an example:

“Nowadays people are changing the way things have always been done around here, making their own rules and not paying any attention to traditions.”

paraphrasing: “You feel that departmental guidelines are not being followed.”

clarifying: “In what ways, exactly, are people changing the policies?”

reflecting feelings: “You seem upset about the way policies are not being implemented.”

- a) “This new software is really great. It has a whole range of features that would tie right into our work here and really cut down on a lot of routine paperwork.”
- b) “I don’t think this long term disability policy is going to work. It gives too much to the potential goof-off artist and not enough to someone really too sick to work for a long time.”
- c) “When is Personnel going to get some extra help? We’re way behind here and I don’t see any improvement in sight. We’ve been waiting almost three weeks for new computers, and just received an acknowledgment of our order yesterday.”
6. Identify the following questions as open, closed, hidden-assumption, or two-part.
- a) If absenteeism is on the rise, how can we stop it?
- b) What is the mission statement of this organization?
- c) Will the feasibility study be finished by May?
- d) Are women buying more cars these days, and what kind of cars do they prefer?
- e) Why hasn’t this problem been addressed?
7. Many communications experts state that “when body language contradicts spoken language, trust the body” —does this ring true for you? Why or why not? Also consider using in-class discussion to consider how this concept is affected by cross-cultural contexts.