Defining Communication

Inquire: Is Everything Communication?

Overview
Communication is a big concept. It covers everything from your tone, your body language, your clothes, and your words. Even the layout of rooms and buildings can be studied as communication. With so many different things to consider about the communication cycle, many scholars seek to find the most important or the biggest part of the communication process. In fact, some scholars go as far as saying that words are the least important part of the communication process.

Big Question: What is the most important part of communication?

Watch: Is Everything Communication?
Communication means different things to different people.

If you asked a couple of people what communication is, one person might say “talking” while the other might say “text messages.” Both would be correct! There are many different examples of what communication is including: road signs, Braille, written or typed words, sign language, spoken words, and even emojis. In short, everything is communication. If there is a meaning that someone can interpret, it is communication. Effective communication is the ability to use all kinds of communication to successfully get your message across to your audience. By identifying what composes communication, you will be able to more masterfully construct and deliver messages so that your communication in any situation, from work to relationships, will be more effective at conveying what you want it to.

For instance, imagine you are having a conversation with your best friend.

Try to write down the scene you imagined. Was it a face-to-face conversation? Or maybe a text message? Did it all happen over SnapChat? All of these options bring different elements that can be studied.

Now imagine a conversation with your best friend in a restaurant.

Do you make assumptions about the quality of food based on the style of the menu? Does the server’s attitude tell you anything about how busy the day has been? Communication is not just about the words someone speaks or writes. Many things, from facial expression to tone, convey messages that are just as much a part of communication as the words that go along with them.
This lesson will cover the basics of communication, starting with a definition. After the definition, you will learn the components that make up communication, and the ways that communication is studied. Try to keep in mind your own daily communication with others and identify ways you communicate throughout the day.

Finally, once you have gone over the lesson come back to the scenarios mentioned here. Reimagine a conversation with your friend, and write down what you see this time. After learning about communication, does it change the way you imagine conversations with a friend? Does your imaginary conversation suddenly seem like more than it initially appeared?

Read: Defining Communication

Overview

Communication is a vital part of everyday life. This lesson will help you define the term communication, as well as identify differing approaches to studying communication and label the different parts of the communication model. Additionally, you will discover aspects of communication found in everyday life and learn about the benefits of studying communication. This introduction will set the foundation for further deep dives into the field of communication. While mostly everyone talks, this lesson will explain the goals of talking and the steps we take to talk most effectively.

What is Communication?

Are you able to develop a simple definition of communication? Try to write a one-sentence definition — it’s more difficult than you think! For decades, communication professionals have had difficulty coming to any consensus about how to define the term communication (Hovland; Morris; Nilsen; Sapir; Schramm; Stevens). Even today, there is no single agreed-upon definition of communication. Defining communication feels like nailing jello to a wall.

Communication can be defined as the process of using symbols to exchange meaning. It is important to note that this definition says nothing about words or language. This is because anything and everything can be communication. Hand signals, t-shirt logos, and body language are all forms of communication just as much as spoken words are.

Communication Models

There are two kinds of communication models that are important to understand. The first model, the Linear Model of Communication, is a model that suggests communication moves in one direction. The sender encodes a message, then uses a certain channel (verbal/nonverbal communication) to send it to a receiver who decodes (interprets) the message. Noise is anything that interferes with, or changes, the original encoded message.

A major criticism of the Linear Model of Communication is that it suggests communication only occurs in one direction. It also does not show how context, or our personal experiences, impact communication. Television serves as a good example of the linear model. Have you ever talked back to your television while you were watching it? Maybe you were watching a sporting event or a dramatic show and you talked at the television. Yet, television works in one
direction; no matter how much you talk to the television, it will not respond to you. Now apply this idea to the communications in your relationships. It seems ridiculous to think that this is how we would communicate with each other on a regular basis.

This example shows the limits of the linear model for understanding communication, particularly human to human communication. Yet there are still some instances where the model holds up. Think about work meetings. Often these happen as linear communication where a supervisor has a specific message to send to a department. While these meetings are not necessarily meant to happen in a linear fashion, often they do.

Given the limitations of the Linear Model, Barnlund adapted the model to more fully represent what occurs in most human communication exchanges. The second communication model, the **Transactional Model**, demonstrates that communication participants act as senders and receivers, simultaneously. Communication is not a simple one-way transmission of a message; the personal filters and experiences of the participants impact each communication exchange. The Transactional Model demonstrates that we are simultaneously senders and receivers and that noise and personal filters always influence the outcomes of every communication exchange.

The Transactional Model of Communication adds to the Linear Model by suggesting that both parties in a communication exchange act as sender and receiver simultaneously, encoding and decoding messages to and from each other at the same time.

**Approaches to Communication**

We can study many different kinds of communication. These areas offer up valuable insight into the kinds of communication we engage in every day:

- **Intercultural communication** is communication between members of different cultures. This study focuses on cultural communication differences, and the impact those differences have on cultural values.
- **Interpersonal communication** is communication between people in small settings, such as a conversation between two friends. This study focuses on the choices we make when communicating in informal settings and how those choices contribute to relationship building.
- **Small group communication** looks at communication of groups of people and how group dynamics are impacted by that communication.
- **Organizational communication** looks at larger scale groups and organizations to see how corporations, businesses, governments, and other large groups communicate amongst themselves. An emphasis is placed on how those organizations communicate as an entity, in addition to how people within those organizations communicate individually.

**What is Communication Studies?**

Bruce Smith, Harold Lasswell, and Ralph D. Casey provided a simple answer to the question, “What is communication study?” The scholars stated that communication study is an academic field whose
primary focus is “who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results.”

Although they gave this explanation almost 70 years ago, to this day it succinctly describes the focus of communication scholars and professionals. As professors and students of the communication field, we extensively examine the various forms and outcomes of human communication. On its website, the National Communication Association (NCA), states that communication study “focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels and media. The discipline promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication.” They continue, “Communication is a diverse discipline which includes inquiry by social scientists, humanists, and critical and cultural studies scholars.” Now, if people ask you what you’re studying in a communication class, you have an answer!

Reflect: What’s Most Important?

Poll

Of the five components of the communication model, which is the most important to you?

- Channel
- Message
- Noise
- Receiver
- Sender

Expand: The Parts of a Message

Overview

Earlier, you were introduced to the concept of a communication model. These models, although different in specifics, share the same parts. In this section, you will be taught about these components with a more in-depth look at what they are and what they do in the different communication models.

Parts of Communication Models
A **sender** is someone who encodes and sends a message to a receiver through a particular channel. The sender is the initiator of communication. For example, when you text a friend, ask a teacher a question, or wave to someone, you are the sender of a message.

A **receiver** is the recipient of a message. Receivers must decode (interpret) messages in ways that are meaningful for them. For example, if you see your friend make eye contact, smile, wave, and say “hello” as you pass, you are receiving a message intended for you. When this happens, you must decode the verbal and nonverbal communication in ways that are meaningful to you.

A **message** is the particular meaning or content the sender wishes the receiver to understand. The message can be intentional or unintentional, written or spoken, verbal or nonverbal, or any combination of these. For example, as you walk across campus you may see a friend walking toward you. When you make eye contact, wave, smile, and say “hello,” you are offering a message that is intentional, spoken, verbal, and nonverbal.

A **channel** is the method a sender uses to send a message to a receiver. The most common channels humans use are verbal and nonverbal communication. Verbal communication relies on language and includes speaking, writing, and sign language. Nonverbal communication includes gestures, facial expressions, paralanguage, and touch. We also use communication channels that are mediated (such as television or the computer), which may utilize both verbal and nonverbal communication. Using the greeting example above, the channels of communication include both verbal and nonverbal communication.

**Noise** is anything that interferes with the sending or receiving of a message. Noise is external (a jack hammer outside your apartment window or loud music in a nightclub) and internal (physical pain, psychological stress, or nervousness about an upcoming test). External and internal noise make encoding and decoding messages more difficult. Using our ongoing example, if you are on your way to lunch and listening to music on your phone when your friend greets you, you may not hear your friend say “hello,” and you may not wish to chat because you are hungry. In this case, both internal and external noise influenced the communication exchange. Noise is in every communication context and, therefore, no message is received exactly as it is transmitted by a sender because noise distorts it in one way or another.

**Lesson Toolbox**

**Additional Resources and Readings**

**Transmission Model of Communication: Shannon and Weaver**
- A short video explaining the most basic model of communication
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OY1JsGFZprc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OY1JsGFZprc)

**Transactional Model of Communication**
- A short video explaining the transactional model of communication and how it differs from the traditional model of communication
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6d7w5CRnf7k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6d7w5CRnf7k)

**The Communication Model: How to Understand Communication Processes**
- A video providing an in-depth look at different kinds of noise and other breakdowns that occur in the communication process, and how to be mindful of them
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBIojqUyBnE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBIojqUyBnE)
Lesson Glossary

communication: the process of using symbols to exchange meaning

Linear Model of Communication: a model that suggests communication moves only in one direction

Transactional Model: a communication model that demonstrates that communication participants act as senders and receivers simultaneously

communication study: focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels and media; the discipline promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication

sender: someone who encodes and sends a message to a receiver through a particular channel

receiver: the recipient of a message

message: the particular meaning or content the sender wishes the receiver to understand

channel: the method a sender uses to send a message to a receiver

noise: anything that interferes with the sending or receiving of a message

Check Your Knowledge

1. Communication is only the words people say to each other.
   A. True
   B. False

2. An example of the Linear Model of Communication would be watching a television show.
   A. True
   B. False

3. Interpersonal communication studies focuses on how a business communicates to its customers.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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