

ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN MANAGEMENT TEACHING & RESEARCH IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The understanding of how to convey (when speaking) and interpret (when listening) meaning is always be essential for effective communication, management and relationships. In other instances, management may wish to address employees directly in a uniform fashion without differentiating styles, such as when issuing a personal note from an executive to all employees or when communicating highly important matters with companywide implications. It is important to develop the message and its style around common denominators found in the shared values and culture of the workplace. This paper will describe the Mehrabians' model of communication as well as critical theory of communication in management teaching and research. Critical theory, which has been a distinguishing feature of the communication research program at one of the Management Schools, in which students are from different – different countries, but significant reflection is required to translate the theory into meaningful classroom experiences.

Keywords: Classroom, Communication, Critical theory, Management & Mehrabian's model.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, management students need to understand the complexities of communication in the context of a multicultural and multilingual workplace or the organization's international scope and cultural heterogeneity. Just as employees vary in their national, ethnic and religious backgrounds, so does their perception of communication. Learning about the customs, beliefs and practices that make up a foreign culture's fabric can lead to a better understanding of what the same things can mean for different people. Yet it may be difficult to discern countless cultural distinctions-some of which are subtle-to determine what communication style would be most appropriate for a particular message. "For this reason, top management may often choose to delegate communication to regional managers, who then style their messages in a fashion that best suits local culture," Hecker says. In other instances, management may wish to address employees directly in a uniform fashion without differentiating styles, such as when issuing a personal note from an executive to all employees or when communicating highly important matters with companywide implications.

Mehrabian's Communications Model

It is important to develop the message and its style around common denominators found in the shared values and culture of the workplace. Professor Albert Mehrabian's communications model established this classic statistic for the effectiveness of spoken communications:

- 7% of meaning is in the words that are spoken.
- 38% of meaning is paralinguistic (the way that the words are said).
- 55% of meaning is in facial expression.

Mehrabian's model above has become one of the most widely referenced statistics in communications. However, it is arguably on occasions applied in an overly simplistic or indiscriminate manner. The model is particularly useful in illustrating the importance of considering factors other than words alone when trying to convey (as the speaker) or interpret (as the listener) meaning but, care needs to be taken when considering the context of the communication. Style, expression, tone, facial expression and body language in Mehrabian's experiments did indeed account for 93% of the meaning inferred by the people in the study. But this is not a general rule that you can transfer to any given communications situation.

The understanding of how to convey (when speaking) and interpret (when listening) meaning is always be essential for effective communication, management and relationships. But using the Mehrabian percentages is not a reliable model to overlay into all communications scenarios especially in the multicultural context. Mehrabian's model is a seminal piece of work, and it's amazingly helpful in explaining the importance of careful and appropriate communications. Like any model, care must be exercised when transferring it to different situations. Use the basic findings and principles as a guide and an example - don't transfer the percentages, or make direct assumptions about degrees of effectiveness, to each and every communication situation.

In his book "Beyond Culture," anthropologist Edward T. Hall distinguishes between low-context and high-context communication. His analysis finds that people of low-context cultures verbalize much of the background information explicitly, since they are not as well informed on subjects outside their own interests. In high-context cultures, a great deal of the background information is implicit and requires reading between the lines, with the assumption that message recipients are well informed on many subjects.

Every organization has its own unique culture based on the traditions and value set of its members,

which come across in their beliefs, attitudes, priorities and behavioral norms, which is what all management students and their educators should take into consideration while talking of communication, as ultimately they have to step beyond the halls of learning into the organizational workplace.

Critical Theory Of Communication

CRITICAL THEORY, which has a distinguishing feature of the communication research program at the one of the Management Schools, in which students are from different – different countries, but significant reflection is required to translate the theory into meaningful classroom experiences. The need for reflection comes from two key tensions in teaching management communication: One is the tension between teaching practical, career-focused skills versus critical and/or interpretive analysis; the second is the multicultural classroom environment where students, educated in a monocultural context, are exposed to other interpretations and critiques of their own cultural predispositions and values.

The Critical Reflexive Framework

Our goal as educators is to empower students to participate effectively in both the organizations and communities in which they reside. To achieve this goal while managing the tensions identified above, we embrace a framework of critical reflexive practice (e.g., Cunliffe, 2004). We mean critical to suggest both the sense of questioning, as in "critical thinking," as well as in the sense of critical theory--unmasking hidden tensions and meanings with a goal of emancipating thinking and action (e.g., Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). By reflexive, we mean an awareness of and questioning of one's own assumptions and constructions of reality.

This framework embodies three underlying principles. **The first is that the knowledge is both socially constructed and competing.** As teachers, we want students to "question assumptions and taken-for-granted actions, think about where/who [they] are and would like to be, challenge conceptions of reality, and explore new possibilities" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 411).

The second principle is praxis. Jun (1994) defined praxis as the need for self-conscious and ethical actions where individuals question their past behavior as well as future possibilities. Students need to draw on their lived experiences and values while attending to interpersonal relations, communication, conflicts, feelings, and politics. In management communication education, praxis encourages students to reframe past behavior and, by linking to theory, to open up new possibilities for management practice. Thus, we are teaching students a process of reflection and analysis for future action.

The third underlying principle is a critique of values and culture, especially those of the dominant culture. Students analyze and discuss the broader social, cultural, and political issues and critically deconstruct them in light of management communication theory and practice.

The Critical Reflexive Framework Tools

The critical reflexive framework requires a teaching methodology that employs tools such as dialogue, decentering, and experiential learning. Dialogue is an exchange of ideas among teachers and students-a moment where we become "struck" by an idea, so that we are then moved to change our ways of talking and acting (Cunliffe, 2004). Dialogue and critical thinking requires students to think more humanistically about the impact of their actions as they are learning (Freire, 1972; Pezone & Singer, 1997). In management education, dialogue is a central way of connecting the individual with the whole organization (Senge, 1992). In classroom practice, dialogue is promoted by positive

student/teacher relationships and classroom activities that promote learning opportunities (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Giroux, 1987).

The second tool, decentering, aims to provide opportunities for students to recognize conflicting perspectives on a topic, and that the truth is something that is socially constructed (Bean, 2001). Through role play and readings that expose different voices, and by challenging insights through dialogue, students are required to adopt a standpoint on a topic that is different from, and sometimes contradictory to, their own beliefs.

Finally, experiential learning can create opportunities in which students experience conflicting values and perspectives, are forced to make and question choices, and then reflect on the assumptions and constructions that led to their choices. Such tools enable students to realize that there are no "right" answers to problems. These principles and tools all lead to critical reflexive practice.

As critical/interpretive scholars, we encourage students to question existing power structures, knowledge, and conditions in the wider society (Pennycook, 2001). To achieve this goal, Banks (1991) argued that "we must engage students in a process of attaining knowledge in which they are required to critically analyze conflicting paradigms and explanations and the value assumptions of different knowledge systems, forms, and categories" (p. 126). Furthermore, Grey (2004) reinforced this style of critical engagement in his call for critical management education. He emphasized the importance of drawing on student (lived) experiences and values while attending to interpersonal relations, communication, conflicts, feelings, and politics. This approach aims to develop managers who demonstrate moral and political responsibility. The critical reflexive framework not only challenges students but also challenges us as educators to evaluate how we teach management communication. It is also useful for managing the tensions we see as central to our teaching of management communication in the management programs.

Applying The Framework

In the following sections, three critical incidents are presented and discussed how the tensions are reflected in these critical incidents. It is then described how the teacher's response to the incident reflects the principles in the framework of critical reflexive practice and what further possibilities the framework presents.

Critical Incident 1: Using Dialogue

In an executive MBA class where students were examining corporate identity, a student challenged the notion that an organization, when developing an identity strategy, should aim for consistency in messages—a notion that is prominent in the corporate identity literature (e.g., Olins, 1989). He argued that his organization did not have consistency of message and yet the stakeholders were all satisfied with the messages they were receiving. Rather than defend the consistency view, the teacher encouraged the questioning. In the ensuing discussion among students and teachers, the consistency approach was further challenged.

After that session, the CEO of the student's employing organization was contacted and a project established to understand exactly the meaning in the messages that the organization was sending out to its stakeholders. The researchers found that the strategy was based on consistency but that consistency occurred at the level of brand values and not in content communicated or presentation of message (Leitch & Motion, 1999). This was an important finding for the study of corporate identity.

This critical incident demonstrates the critical-practical tension where students and teachers challenged understandings of corporate identity through dialogue. Students, by drawing upon their lived experiences, challenged established understandings of corporate identity as well as the theoretical perspectives the teachers had put forward. In being "struck" by an idea, students and

teachers were able to reframe their understandings. By engaging in critical reflection and analysis, they could develop further possibilities for how they thought about management theories and practices.

The incident led to further reflections and possibilities, including an action learning approach. In addition, the dialogue enabled students to engage in cultural critique of the theory and readings from the perspective of their own business practices. Students viewed the critiques as salient because they had evolved from their own lived experiences.

Faculty later used the incident as a teaching example of how dialogue can contribute to scholarship. Readings from faculty publications were then used in the management programs and provided students, who had minimal work experience, with examples of theory and cases that applied to the contemporary multicultural business world.

Critical Incident 2: Using Praxis

The second critical incident arose when students in a public relations course felt frustrated with materials that seemed too theoretical and avoid of practical value to their future careers (which is the case with most of our management schools). Furthermore, a focus on critical reflection had led students to question contemporary practices to such an extent that some no longer wished to work in the field of communication, especially in public relations. When students were asked to analyze and apply critical discourse theory, they questioned whether any practitioner used the theory and how practitioners reconciled a critical understanding of public relations with the practical requirements of the role.

The incident reflects the critical-practical tension. Students expected to learn practical, career-focused skills, whereas the teacher's goals were to bring a critical and/or interpretive analysis, through the application of theory, to practice. To resolve this tension, the teacher invited a number of practitioners to participate in a panel discussion with the class. The teacher and students were thus able to explore the implications of critical theory for practice. The practitioners, alumni of the department, first talked about how they used such theory in their campaign work; then reflected on some challenges they had encountered; and finally explained how an understanding of critical discourse analysis, for example, had helped them understand and resolve the challenges.

The incident illustrated the value of praxis, as students were able to critically reflect on alternatives to practice and, as a result, see new directions for public relations practice. The teacher could bridge the gap between students' desires for materials that are vocationally oriented and teachers' commitments to critical pedagogies (Pennycook, 2001). Above all, the outcomes from the incident reinvigorated students' interests in working in the industry.

The incident presents further possibilities for teaching and learning. Bringing in practitioners enables the teacher to adopt experiential learning by asking students to apply critical discourse analysis to real campaigns. A further activity, where students engage in decentering, may require students, through role-play, to take on the role of a public relations manager or a stakeholder role such as a community member or activist. Enacting a different role enables students to see conflicting perspectives and thus promotes a more complex understanding.

Critical Incident 3: Negotiating Diversity

In the third incident, two New Zealand Maori students related the experiences of their parents who were not allowed to speak Maori in school. Then a Korean student stated that her own mother had experienced exactly the same form of cultural suppression from the Chinese. The revelation of similarities came as a surprise to all the students, but in particular to the Chinese students, who had a

different understanding and experience of their history and who felt uncomfortable at what could have been a criticism of them. The Maori students, who had long believed that their culture was alone in their historical treatment by a colonizing power, were fascinated to learn otherwise.

Although this dialogue was initially unsettling for some students, the teacher addressed the issues from a more general and theoretical perspective, rather than allowing any form of specific criticism. Historically, language suppression has been a widely used tool for invading or colonizing people and cultures. People in Wales, for example, describe similar experiences (Jones, 2004). Instead of avoiding the discomfort that existed in the classroom, the teacher used dialogue to expose the students' perspectives of international politics and public relations. That dialogue led to greater understanding of the vital role of language as a source of power in cultural expression and/or suppression. Through this engagement the students were able to understand how experiences, beliefs, values, and identities can be socially constructed and that "they play a role in constituting their [the students'] everyday organizational realities" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 411).

Challenges For Teachers In Critical Reflexive Practice

The incident illustrates the monocultural-multicultural tension as students began to critique their own cultural assumptions and values as well as those from other cultures. This tension raises three challenges for teachers engaging in critical reflexive practice. **The first focuses on the teaching and learning climate.** Giroux (1997) claimed that students need the classroom to be a safe place where they can "cross ideological and political borders to clarify their own moral visions ... and move beyond cultural borders in order to approach other cultural patterns, interpret them critically and eventually challenge their own common-sensical assumptions". Part of negotiating these borders is creating a climate of trust through positive teacher-student relationships where students and teachers can engage in praxis. The teacher in the critical incident eventually achieved this state.

Second, students must manage face, particularly international students from East and Southeast Asia, where communication is predicated on face-preserving strategies (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). The Chinese students experienced discomfort because they perceived the attack on their culture as an attack on their personal identity (as members of that culture). Such is the case with some management schools- multiculturalism can be seen inside a class with a fair mix of people from the North, South, East and West of India. A joke made on the accents can be perceived like a personal attack.

The third challenge is managing the dominance of one cultural group over others. Where students feel they have greater cultural license to speak, they may be silencing others. This cultural license may be validated by an over reliance on British and North American readings. It may also be validated by the privileging of one teaching and learning style over another. Many of the students, particularly those from East and South, come from traditional learning backgrounds where the teacher holds the power and knowledge. This monologic approach protects the status quo and promotes competition among students. By contrast, a dialogic approach encourages dialogue and communication. Learning is student centered and collaborative, and knowledge is created/co-constructed through reflection and critical thinking (Freire, 1972; Hammond & Gao, 2002). For the Chinese students, critiquing knowledge through reflection and critical thinking was neither a familiar nor an accepted practice, unlike the Maori students who, more recently, have been encouraged to critique colonial practices. The dialogue also enabled the students to see how knowledge had been socially constructed according to the history of the respective cultures.

Conclusion

All three critical incidents illustrate the value of critical reflexive practice as a framework for teaching management communication. Embedded within the framework is the need to question knowledge, to engage in praxis, and to critique our understanding of culture and values within the

classroom. Through the tools of dialogue, decentering, and experiential learning, teachers and students can "examine critically the assumptions underlying [their] actions, the impact of those actions, and from a broader perspective, what passes as good management practice" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 407).

As Guilherme (2002) argued, in practice, it is not a question of depriving teachers and students of truth, certainty, accuracy, and completeness but of offering ideals and principles, showing directions and possibilities, and providing ways and methods for empowerment. Critical reflexive practice enables us to focus on communication rather than persuasion, on empowerment rather than assertion. In addition, this framework helps us to develop managers/practitioners who demonstrate moral, social, political, and cultural responsibility. It can help us infuse students with "civil aspirations"--to have higher expectations of the world and their role in it, "to courageously navigate the moral potholes," and to recognize the world's resources are finite (Giacalone, 2004, p. 419). They need to be able to participate effectively in a society that is increasingly messier and more complex (Grey, 2004).

Teachers and students need to engage in dialogue to allow the emergence of different perspectives, admit when we are unsure of the answers, and critique all types of knowledge and values. Through critical reflexive practice, we can prepare students to be effective communicators in a business environment that is increasingly challenging and changing.

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