Survey of Communication Study/Chapter 1 - Foundations: Defining Communication and Communication Study

Chapter 1

Foundations: Defining Communication and Communication Study

Chapter Objectives:

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

• Explain Communication Study.

• Define Communication.

• Explain the linear and transactional models of communication.

• Discuss the benefits of studying Communication.

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ou are probably reading this book because you are taking an introductory communication class at your college or university. Many colleges and universities around the country require students to take some form of communication course in order to graduate. Introductory communication classes include courses on public speaking, interpersonal communication, or a class that combines both. However, a new trend is beginning to emerge. Many Communication departments are now offering an introductory course that explains what Communication is, how it is studied as an academic field, and what areas of specialization make up the field of Communication. That is our goal in this text.

As professors, we hear a lot of people talk about communication both on and off our campuses. We're always surprised at how few people can actually explain what communication is, or what Communication departments are about. Even our majors sometimes have a hard time explaining to others what it is they study. Through this book we provide you with the basics for understanding what communication is, what Communication scholars and students study, and how you can effectively use the study of communication in your life, whether or not you are a Communication major. We accomplish this by taking you on a journey through time. The material in the text is framed chronologically, and is largely presented in context of the events that occurred before the industrial revolution (2500 BCE-1800's), and after the industrial revolution (1800's-Present). In each chapter we include boxes that provide examples on that chapter's topic in context of "then," "now," and "you" to help you grasp how the study of communication at colleges and universities impacts life in the "real world."

To help you have a general understanding of communication study as an academic field, we have divided the book into two parts: Part I (Chapters 1–6) provides you with the foundations of Communication as an academic field of study. In this chapter you will learn the definitions of Communication and Communication study, as well as understand possible careers that result from studying communication. In Chapters 2 and 3 you will learn that verbal and nonverbal communication are the primary human acts we study as an academic field. By reading a brief history of Communication study in Chapter 4, you will learn the chronological development of the field, which determined our choices for how we ordered the chapters in Part II. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 briefly highlight the different theories and research methods we use to study human communication. Part II (Chapters 7–13) highlights many of the prominent communication specializations that have shaped the field in the past 100 years. We present them in the chronological order in which they became part of the Communication discipline. While there are many more areas of

specialization we would like to cover in this text, we have chosen to highlight the ones that have shaped what you likely recognize as part of the Communication departments at your colleges and universities. Because we cannot cover every specialization, we chose to include ones that were instrumental in the earlier development of the field that are still being explored today, as well as specializations we believe represent new directions in the field that examine communication in our every-changing society.

Before we introduce you to verbal and nonverbal communication, history, theories, research methods, and the chronological development of communication specializations; we want to set a foundation for you in this chapter by explaining Communication Study, Communication, Models of Communication, and communication at work.

Defining Communication Study

W hen we tell others that we teach Communication, people often ask questions like, "Do you teach radio and television?" "Do you teach public speaking?" "Do you do news broadcasts?" "Do you work with computers?" "Do you study Public Relations?" "Is that Journalism or Mass Communication?" But, the most common question we get is, "What is that?" It's interesting that most people will tell us they know what communication is, but they do not have a clear understanding of what we study and teach as an academic discipline. In fact, many professors in other departments on our campus also ask us what it is we study and teach. If you're a Communication major, you've probably been asked the same question, and like us, had a hard time answering it succinctly. If you memorize the definition below, you will have a quick and simple answer to those who ask you what you study as a Communication major.

Bruce Smith, Harold Lasswell, and Ralph D. Casey (1946) provided a good and simple answer to the question, "What is communication study?" They state 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"* (p. 121).

Communication Study
• Who?
• What?
• What Channel?
• To Whom?
• What Are the Results?

Although they gave this explanation over 60 years ago, it still succinctly describes the focus of Communication scholars and professionals. As professors and students of communication we extensively examine the various forms and outcomes of human communication. In 1995, the National Communication Association (NCA), our national organization, stated that **communication study** *"focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels and media. The field promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication"* (NCA, 1995). Now, if people ask you what you're studying in a Communication class, you have an answer!

We use Smith, Lasswell, and Casey's definition to guide how we discuss the content in this book. Part I of this book sets the foundation by explaining the historical development of how we came to this definition, the "what" and "channels" (verbal and nonverbal communication), and the "whom" and "results" (theories and research methods). Before we get into those chapters, it is important for you to know how we define the actual term communication to give you context for our discussion of it throughout the book.

Defining Communication

N
ow that you know how to define communication study, are you able to develop a simple definition of communication? Try to write a one-sentence definition of communication!

Communication Study Then

Aristotle The Communication Researcher

Aristotle said, "Rhetoric falls into three divisions, determined by the three classes of listeners to speeches. For of the three elements in speech-making -- speaker, subject, and person addressed -- it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object."

For Aristotle it was the "to whom" that determined if communication occurred and how effective it was. Aristotle, in his study of "who says what, through what channels, to whom, and what will be the results" focused on persuasion and its effect on the audience. Aristotle thought is was extremely important to focus on the audience in communication exchanges.

What is interesting is that when we think of communication we are often, "more concerned about ourselves as the communications source, about our message, and even the channel we are going to use. Too often, the listener, viewer, reader fails to get any consideration at all (Lee, 1993).

Aristotle's statement above demonstrates that humans who have been studying communication have had solid ideas about how to communicate effectively for a very long time. Even though people have been formally studying communication for a long time, it is still necessary to continue studying communication in order to improve it.

Lee, R. L. (1993). Developing Effective Communications [Website]. University of Missouri Extension. Available: [1] *[2008, March 31st].'*

We're guessing it's more difficult than you think. Don't be discouraged. For decades communication professionals have had difficulty coming to any consensus about how to define the term communication (Hovland, 1948; Morris, 1946; Nilsen, 1957; Sapir, 1933; Schramm, 1948; Smith, 1950; Stevens, 1950). Even today, there is no single agreed-upon definition of communication. In 1970 and 1984 Frank Dance looked at 126 published definitions of communication in our literature and said that the task of trying to develop a single definition of communication that everyone likes is like trying to nail jello to a wall. Over twenty years later, defining communication still feels like nailing jello to a wall.

We recognize that there are countless good definitions of communication, but we feel it's important to provide you with our definition. We are not arguing that this definition of communication is the best, but you will understand the content of this text better if you understand how we have come to define communication. For the purpose of this text we define communication as ***the process of using symbols to exchange meaning***.

Let's examine two models of communication to help you further grasp this definition. Shannon and Weaver (1949) proposed a Mathematical Model of Communication (sometimes called the Linear Model) that serves as a basic model of communication. This model suggests that communication is simply the transmission of a message from one source to another. Watching television serves as an example of this. You act as the receiver when you watch television, receiving messages from the source (the television program). To better understand this, let's break down each part of this model.

The **Mathematical or Linear Model of Communication** is a model that suggests communication moves only 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 **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 email a friend, ask a salesclerk a question, or wave to someone you are the sender of a message.

• A **receiver** is *the recipient of a message*. The receiver must decode messages in ways that are meaningful for him/her. 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.

• 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 which we will discuss in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. 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 your ipod 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.

A major criticism of the Linear Model 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 people in the television. Did they respond to you? We're sure they did not. 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 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.

Given the limitations of the Linear Model, Barnlund (1970) adjusted the model to more fully represent what occurs in most human communication exchanges. 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 both sender and receiver simultaneously, encoding and decoding messages to and from each other at the same time*.

While these models are overly simplistic representations of communication, they illustrate some of the complexities of defining and studying communication. Going back to Smith, Lasswell, and Casey we may choose to focus on one, all, or a combination of the following: senders of communication, receivers of communication, channels of communication, messages, noise, context, and/or the outcome of communication. We hope you recognize that studying communication is simultaneously detail-oriented (looking at small parts of human communication), and far-reaching (examining a broad range of communication exchanges).

Communication Study and You

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f you think about Smith, Lasswell, and Casey's statement that those of us who study communication investigate, "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results" you should realize how truly complex a task we perform (p. 121). While we'll explore many examples later in the book, we want to briefly highlight a few examples of what you might study if you are interested in communication.

> **Communication Study Now**
>
> *Aristotle and an Aardvark Go to Washington: Understanding Political Doublespeak Through Philosophy and Jokes? - Book by Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein.*
>
> *Does Aristotle's work still apply today outside of college classrooms? Of course it does. In their new book "Aristotle and an Aardvark Go to Washington: Understanding Political Doublespeak Through Philosophy and Jokes," Cathcart and Klein use Aristotle's work with persuasion to take a humorous look at how our politicians communicate.*
>
> *"For instance, 'Rumsfeld complained that there were no decent targets for bombing in Afghanistan and that we should consider bombing in Iraq, which, he said, had better targets.'" The authors of this text state that, "Rumsfeld is here employing the old con known as ignoratio elenchi (ignorance of the issue)."*
>
> *Using jokes, cartoons, and insights from Aristotle and others, this book explains statements from politicians such as: "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence." (Donald Rumsfeld), and "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is." (Bill Clinton).*
>
> *-BuzzFlash. (2008). BuzzFlash Reviews. [Website]. BuzzFlash. Available:* [2] *[2008, March 31st].*

Studying communication is exciting because there are so many possibilities on which to focus. For example, you might study celebrity gender images in magazine advertising (Stafford, Spears & Chung-Kue, 2003); the effect of political advertising and news on people's perceptions of political candidates (Tasperson & Fan, 2004); the various ways teachers communicate power and credibility in the classroom (Teven & Herring, 2005); how sons and daughters communicate disappointment (Miller-Day & Lee, 2001); how power is communicated and challenged in corporations (Patel & Xavier, 2005); the impact of intercultural communication and its effects on the "global village" (Young, 2005); or how women make sense of, and enact, their role as both professional and mother (Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Liu, Bowers & Conn, 2005).

The above examples demonstrate just a small taste of what we can examine through the lens of communication. In reality, studying communication has almost limitless possibilities. That's what makes this field so dynamic and exciting! When you think about the infinite number of variables we can study, as well as the infinite number of communication contexts, the task of studying "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results?" is open to countless possibilities. The study of communication has proven helpful to us as social beings as we work to better understand the complexities of our interactions and relationships.

As a student taking an introductory Communication course, you might be thinking, "Why does this matter to me?" One reason it is important for you to study and know communication is that these skills will help you succeed in personal, social, and professional situations. A survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that "College students who wish to separate themselves from the competition during their job search would be wise to develop proficiencies most sought by employers, such as communication, interpersonal, and teamwork skills." In fact, in 2004, three of the top six qualities employers looked for in employees were "communication skills," "interpersonal skills," and "teamwork skills." Whether you major in Communication or not, the more you understand communication, the greater potential you have to succeed in all aspects of your life. Another important reason for studying communication is that in can lead to a variety of career opportunities.

Summary

Communication Study and You

Careers with a Communication Degree

The kind of skills developed by Communication majors are highly valued by all kinds of employers. Courses and activities in Communication departments both teach and make use of the skills ranked consistently high by employers. Students with a degree in Communication are ready to excel in a wide variety of careers. Below are listed some broad categories that most commonly come to mind:

Education (including elementary, high school, and college), Law, Dispute Resolution, Business Management, Marketing, Sales, Advertising, Public Relations, Social Advocacy, Communication Consulting, Computer Services, Radio Broadcasting, TV Broadcasting, Administration, Politics, Corporate Training and Development

I n this chapter you have learned that the purpose of this book is to introduce you to the academic field of Communication by setting a foundation of communication history and study in the first six chapters, followed by the chronological presentation of some of the major specializations that make up this academic field.

Smith, Laswell, and Casey offer a simple definition of communication study: "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results" (p.121). Now you can provide an answer to those who ask you what Communication study is about. Our definition of communication, ***the process of using symbols to exchange meaning***, allows you to understand how we use this term throughout the book. The linear and transactional models of communication act as a visual representations of both communication study and communication. Finally, you are now aware of the importance of studying communication: that it impacts your personal, social, and professional life.

Discussion Questions

1. According to our definition, what is communication? What do we not consider to be communication?
2. Using our definition of communication study, explain how Communication is different from other majors such as Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, etc?
3. Name three people who you feel use communication effectively in their jobs? In what ways do they communicate effectively using verbal and nonverbal communication?

Key Terms

- channel
- communication
- communication study
- linear model
- message
- noise
- receiver
- sender
- transactional model

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