



A Publication of the National
Communication Association

Why Communication?

Communication is a topic that people assume they know a great deal about, particularly because they interact with many individuals on a daily basis via multiple channels—face-to-face conversations, phone, and email, for example. Yet there is much more to the discipline of Communication than many realize. Communication Currents invited five Communication scholars—[Kevin Barge](#), [Brant Burleson](#), [Dennis Gouran](#), [Lynn Harter](#), and [John Heineman](#)—to respond to questions people typically have about the discipline of Communication as well as how the issues studied in the discipline relate to everyday life. This essay first appeared in Communication Currents in 2007. It's been one of the most requested essays and is republished here.

Why should students take courses in Communication?

Brant Burleson: Good communication matters. It matters fundamentally in terms of the individual's success personally, in terms of their personal relationships, it matters maybe even more in terms of their success professionally. There are a lot of studies that show that employers want good communication skills in their employees first and foremost, and by that, they mean in addition to being able to read and write effectively, to be able to orally communicate with others effectively, to participate in teams. And in fact, there is a large body of research that shows that effective communication skills are one of the major predictors of upward mobility in the organization, that is, people who have good communication skills are more likely to get promoted, they're more likely to get raises, they're more likely to end up getting positions that they want. People with good communication skills are not only more effective in informing others and persuading others, they're also more effective at getting support from others and acquiring information from others, they're acquiring emotional support from others and getting others to believe in them and what they're doing. And as you can imagine, those are tremendously important skills in virtually any aspect of professional life.

Then, in the personal sector, good communication skills matter so fundamentally in terms of the quality of your family relationships, the relationship with your close partner. Good

communication is part and parcel of being a good parent, communicating effectively with your child, communicating effectively with your neighbors, and communicating effectively with others in your community. And the real truth of the matter is, we're not taught how to do that. We may be exposed to good models here and there, but that's really happenstance. For the most part, we're not really ever taught how to be good persuaders, provide information, provide support, even entertain each other, and that's why you want to take Communication classes in college, because that's where you should be learning those kinds of communication skills, skills that are going to make a difference in the quality of your life.

Lynn Harter: Communication is an integral part of a liberal studies education because what communication helps students to focus on how they use symbolic resources at hand to create and maintain relationships, to participate as a citizen in the public sphere, whether that's attending a city council meeting and exercising their voice about a local initiative or petition. Or maybe it's being involved on a board of directors for a local non-profit organization and being the person who's responsible for communicating with various stakeholders of that organization.

What are the common misperceptions people have about communicating and how do those lead to mistakes when they communicate?

Kevin Barge: Most people think that communication is about getting your point across clearly. Regardless of the context, regardless of who you're talking to, regardless of the situation, you need to be clear in your communication. I think that's a misperception because I think there are times at which being ambiguous can be very effective in your communication. Think about for example organizations when they issue PR statements during a crisis. They want to be as clear as possible about what they're doing. They also want to be a little ambiguous sometimes so that they give themselves some wiggle room in case they have to adjust their strategy. I think one of the reasons that this is a misperception—that we need to be clear—is that our dominant way of thinking about communication is that it's about getting your point across, or what some people call transferring information.

I think we need to think about communication differently and change the perception of what communication is, that communication is about creating relationships, whether that's creating romantic relationships, whether that's creating relationships in a team, whether that's creating relationships in the workplace, say between an employee and his or her boss, or whether that's creating relationships among nations or countries. You've got to think about communication creates a relationship. So how we communicate creates different things. A simple example is what happens when you call me Dr. Barge. What relationship do you create? Well, you create a relationship where there's hierarchy. I'm a doctor, you may be in a subordinate position. You create a position that's more formal, in terms of the relationship. We are now talking about my educational role and position. What changes if you call me Kevin? Well, now it's an informal relationship, we're peers.

So those small things we do in language create different kinds of relationships and different ways of working together. So I think one of the biggest misperceptions is thinking that clear communication is good communication. And I think the reason we think that is because we have a model of communication that says that communication is about transferring information. I think that misperception goes away if we change our perception to one in which communication creates relationships.

John Heineman: The most common mistake that I think so many people make is that they think communication just happens. "I talk, I listen, I hear, I'm an expert." And really what we miss is the fact that we need to be constantly aware of the messages we are receiving and the messages that we are sending. We really need to make sure that people understand that communication either written and especially oral, good communication doesn't just happen. It really comes from thoughtful, precise planning, it comes from really evaluating the kind of communication that's happened in the past, and really trying to predict the outcomes.

Lynn Harter: I think the biggest misperception is that communication represents ideas, rather than constitutes those ideas. So often times, we think that when we communicate an idea, that we're simply transferring information. And certainly, that's accomplished when we turn on CNN and the reporters are outlining the latest developments and tension in the Middle East. But those reporters don't simply transfer that information. They also construct our sense of reality. That communication serves to shape our orientation to the world. It shapes our understanding, both of the past as well as future possibilities. So one of the mistakes people make is that we forget the power and the agency that we have to reconstruct our sense of reality. A reflexive communicator is a person who is constantly aware of and reflective about what our communication choices suggest about our worldview, how those choices reinforce that worldview, and how they both enable and constrain us . . . I think a more powerful way of thinking about the way we communicate is the constitutive view, that communication constitutes, reconstitutes, reconstructs, disrupts our orientation to the world, rather than just simply transferring or transmitting information.

What distinguishes Communication from other areas of study? What makes the Communication discipline unique?

Kevin Barge: Psychology is interested in is the inner motors, those traits, personality characteristics, and cognitive processing styles that drive people's communication. Psychology is concerned about what's inside people and what causes communication. Sociology, on the other hand, is concerned about what's outside people in terms of the drivers in society, social norms, different social structures that begin to drive people's communication. Communication is different. Rather than communication being driven by personality characteristics and social structures, communication is what creates senses of identity and personality. Communication is what constructs the societies and the relationships and the norms that we have. So I think what Communication has that's very

distinct is saying that we need to focus on messages. We look at how talk and conversation and messages begin to create the social arrangements that we live in. For example, there's been a lot of talk about corporate cultures. Where do corporate cultures come from? Corporate cultures come from the way people talk about their organization, the way they construct what values are important, what rituals are important, what standards for performance are important, and what it means to be a member of this organization. So again, I think we need to think about what makes Communication special is it's no longer something that's secondary that can be considered after we think of psychology and sociology. If I can be so bold, we're the game. We're the ones who begin to really look at how personalities, individuals, groups, organizations, and societies get constructed through the way we talk.

Dennis Gouran: I've thought a lot over the years about this question, and it seems to me that what distinguishes us from other disciplines is that we focus on how messages are produced to an extent that others concerned with symbolic exchange do not. We are at the same time concerned with how that process functions. Once messages have been formulated, what kind of life they take on in creating or contributing to other types of message production and how that in turn relates to the outcomes that people achieve as a result of the process of message exchange, be that in terms of task-related outcomes or relational outcomes. I think that makes us distinctive from other disciplines.

John Heineman: As a high school teacher, I see so many students who understand the importance of math, and who understand the importance of writing, which of course, are vitally important, but don't see oral communication as an important part of their scholarly work. And that's really been a goal of mine. We are different than writing, our messages are sent and once they are sent, they are out there in the world and they can't be retrieved, they can't be retracted. It's very different than writing where you get four or five or six different drafts. And you may repeat an oral presentation to another audience that will be different, and so that uniqueness of that moment is something that we can others understand. We know how powerful it is and it really is an issue of power, because our field deals directly with the power that can be gained in both personal and public interactions.

Listening, of course, is unique to our field. The ability to become a strong listener, the ability to really understand the way in which communication works, the barriers keeping you from being a good listener, the strategies that make you a better listener, and the kind of feedback and paraphrasing that can be learned by each individual really makes us unique.

Another area is media literacy. It will be our field that will really help people to understand not only how to create good, effective media, but more importantly, how to be strong consumers of media. How to know what's propaganda, how to know when it's nothing more than logical fallacies, how to know when we are having appeals sent to us that really are to our detriment, how to evaluate those media appeals, and how to deal

with them in a really conscious, consumer way.

What are the three most important things people need to know about communicating in a particular setting?

Kevin Barge (about communicating in organizations): There are three things that I believe are very important to communicating in organizations. The first thing I would say is be aware of the context. If you don't understand the context, you don't know what something means. So what does it mean, for example, if a CEO is earning a thousand times more money than the lowest paid employee in an organization? Well, to an outside watchdog group, that could be corporate greed. To financial analysts on Wall Street, that could be good management. So you have to understand the context if you're going to understand the meaning of communication.

The second thing I would suggest that people think about in terms of communicating in organizations is that communication creates relationships. A lot of people think all communication is about getting your point across, making sure that you're clear in your communication. I take a bit of a different view. Communication creates the relationships that you have with people. There's that old saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me." It is a terrible, terrible axiom because the words we do use can harm people because they create different relationships. So how you talk does matter.

The third thing I would simply say is that people need to be curious about communication. I think one of the biggest problems people run into in organizations when they communicate is they think they know what the other person means. Many times we act on false assumptions. You need to get curious about what people are saying and ask questions like, "well, what do you mean by that?" and "where do you think this is going to take us?" and just a number of different questions to sort out what it is that people are meaning because we come from different kinds of experiences, different backgrounds and we need to really understand what a person means by the words that they use.

Dennis Gouran (about communicating in teams and groups): One thing I think is very important for anyone to know is that exchanging views is insufficient to make sound collective choices. There is this presumption that by getting together and talking somehow out of that exchange emerges something that would approximate the truth or the best possible choice, which is a gross oversimplification of what it takes, communicatively speaking, to perform tasks in ways that lead to successful and desirable outcomes. An almost knee-jerk response to a problematic situation is "well, let's appoint a committee" or "let's get a group together" on the assumption that somehow that works magic. While I think groups are capable of spectacular kinds of achievements, it's not by virtue of the fact that just getting together and exchanging their views.

Secondly, I think everyone should know that everyone plays a role in determining the

quality of leadership, whether that is good or bad. It's a convenience to a lot of individuals to operate from an assumption that leaders are special people and put into those positions because they are expected to bring out the best in others. A lot of the bringing out of the best is self-motivated, not something that others are capable of achieving. I think too many people in group situations suffer from the delusion that they are less able than they might actually be to have an impact on how well a group performs, and as a result, withhold input and the expectation that somebody has the responsibility for moving the group forward toward the achievement of its goals.

Finally, I think it's very important to understand that consensus and appropriateness of choices are not one in the same thing. Ideally, when a group makes an appropriate choice in a problem solving or decision making situation, there would be consensus and in the long run the group will make the right decision. But in short, that's a naïve point of view. I don't know how many group situations I've been part of or have been witness to in which agreement is forged early on in the process and people are ready to end the discussion. That's the sort of thing that I think gives rise to groupthink and other forms of undesirable communicative behavior in group situations.

Brant Burleson (about communicating social support): One of the most challenging things people face in their everyday lives is to answer the question, "What makes for a good, comforting message?" The reason that's challenging is that it is in fact pretty darn difficult to provide emotional support effectively. In fact, probably most people do a bad job, more people do a bad job of providing emotional support than there are people who do a good job. A lot of people have a misconception about comforting. It's almost like another person has an emotional rheostat inside and all I have to do if find the right words, the magic words to make somebody feel better. But in fact, I can't make you feel better by finding the right words. What I really need to do is to help you talk about the problem that is upsetting you. What really works to improve people's feelings is to get them to work through the problem, to get them to make sense out of the situation, to help them understand why they are feeling the way they are about the problem. So the best tip I can give about how to be a good comforter is first and foremost, be a good listener. That means to be a good, active listener and ask people about what's going on and then shut up and listen to them! Don't talk about how you felt in a similar situation, don't talk about what your Aunt Gertrude did, don't give people advice, especially early on in the process. Instead, get them to tell you their story. That's the key to good, effective comforting is to help the person who is upset tell a story about the situation, about the event, about what happened, and then be prepared to listen to that again and again and again as they try to make sense of what happened.

[Communication Currents](#) is a publication of the [National Communication Association](#).

Why Communication? (Ed.) K. Hawkins, *Communication Currents*, 3(4), August 2008. "Used by permission of the National Communication Association."