WHY STUDY COMMUNICATION?

Because you’ve been communicating all of your life, you might wonder why you need to study communication. One answer is that formal study can improve skill. Some people have a natural aptitude for playing basketball. They become even more effective, however, if they study theories of offensive and defensive play and if they practice skills. Likewise, even if you communicate well now, learning about communication and practicing communication skills can make you more effective (Hargie, 2006). Another reason to study communication is that theories and principles help us make sense of what happens in our lives, and they help us have personal impact. For instance, if Mike learned about different gender communities, he might understand why Coreen, like many women, enjoys talking about relationships even when there is no problem. If Mike had better insight into the communication that sustains long-distance relationships, he might be able to enrich his friendship with Chris despite the miles between them. If he knew how to develop an agenda, Mike might also be able to get his group on track. Studying public speaking could help Mike design a good presentation for his class report. Learning to listen better would help Mike retain information like his professor’s tips on organizing oral reports. Communication theory and skills would help Mike maximize his effectiveness in all spheres of his life. To study communication is to learn about much more than communication. John Peters (2000) writes that understanding communication offers “[an] answer to the painful divisions between self and other, private and public, and inner thought and outer word.” Communication in Our Lives will help you understand the profound interweaving of communication into personal, professional, social, and civic life. This book will help you become a more confident and competent communicator. Part I clarifies how communication works (or doesn’t work) and explains how perception, personal identity, language, nonverbal communication, listening, and cultural factors affect the overall communication process. In Part II, we’ll look at communication in five contexts: personal relationships, small groups, organizations, interviews, and mass communication. Part III focuses on public speaking. This chapter lays a foundation for your study of communication. We’ll first define communication. Next we’ll discuss the values of communication in many spheres of your life. Then we’ll examine some models of communication to clarify how the process works. In the third section of the chapter, we’ll describe the breadth of the communication field and careers for communication specialists.

**Defining Communication**

Communication is one of those human activities that everyone recognizes but few can define satisfactorily. Communication is talking to one another, it is television, it is spreading information, it is our hair style, it is literary criticism: the list is endless. This is one of the problems facing academics: can we properly apply the term ‘a subject of study’ to something as diverse and multi-faceted as human communication actually is? Is there any hope of linking the study of, say, facial expression with literary criticism? Is it even an exercise worth attempting? The doubts that lie behind questions like these may give rise to the view that communication is not a subject, in the normal academic sense of the word, but is a multi-disciplinary area of study. This view would propose that what the psychologists and sociologists have to tell us about human communicative behaviour has very little to do with what the literary critic has. This lack of agreement about the nature of communication studies is necessarily reflected in this book. What I have tried to do is to give some coherence to the confusion by basing the book upon the following assumptions. I assume that communication is amenable to study, but that we need a number of disciplinary approaches to be able to study it comprehensively. I assume that all communication involves signs and codes. Signs are artefacts or acts that refer to something other than themselves; that is, they are signifying constructs. Codes are the systems into which signs are organized and which determine how signs may be related to each other. I assume, too, that these signs and codes are transmitted or made available to others: and that transmitting or receiving signs/codes/ communication is the practice of social relationships. I assume that communication is central to the life of our culture: without it culture of any kind must die. Consequently the study of communication involves the study of the culture with which it is integrated. Underlying these assumptions is a general definition of communication as ‘social interaction through messages’.

Communication\* is a systemic process in which people interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings. Let’s elaborate the key parts of this definition. The first important feature of this definition is process. Communication is a process, which means it is ongoing and always in motion, moving ever forward and changing continually. It’s hard to tell when communication starts and stops, because what happened long before we talk with someone may influence interaction, and what occurs in a particular encounter may have repercussions in the future. We cannot freeze communication at any one moment. Communication is also systemic, which means that it occurs within a system of interrelated parts that affect one another. In family communication, for instance, each member of the family is part of the system (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). In addition, the physical environment and the time of day are elements of the system that affect interaction. People interact differently in a formal living room and on a beach, and we may be more alert at certain times of day than at others. Different modes of communication also affect what happens between people. Recall Mike’s dissatisfaction with e-mail and phone contact with his friend Chris. He found face-to-face interaction more satisfying. Communication is also affected by the history of a system. If a family has a history of listening sensitively and working out problems constructively, then saying, “There’s something we need to talk about” is unlikely to cause defensiveness. On the other hand, if the family has a record of nasty conflicts and bickering, then the same comment might arouse strong defensiveness. A lingering kiss might be an appropriate way to show affection in a private setting, but the same action would raise eyebrows in an office. To interpret communication, we have to consider the system in which it takes place. Our definition of communication also emphasizes symbols, which are abstract, arbitrary, and ambiguous representations of other things. Symbols include all language and many nonverbal behaviors, as well as art and music. Anything that abstractly signifies something else can be a symbol. We might symbolize love by giving a ring, by saying “I love you,” or by embracing. Later in this chapter, we’ll have more to say about symbols. For now, just remember that human communication involves interaction with and through symbols. Finally, our definition focuses on meanings, which are the heart of communication. Meanings are the significance we bestow on phenomena—what they signify to us. Meanings are not in experience itself. Instead, we use symbols to create meanings. We ask others to be sounding boards so that we can clarify our own thinking, we talk to them to figure out what things mean, we listen to them to enlarge our own perspectives, and we label feelings to give them reality. We actively construct meaning by working with symbols. There are two levels of meaning in communication. The content level of meaning is the literal message. For example, if someone says to you, “Get lost!” the content level of meaning is that you should get lost. The relationship level of meaning expresses the relationship between communicators. In our example, if the person who says, “Get lost!” is a friend and is smiling, then you would probably interpret the relationship level of meaning as indicating that the person likes you and is kidding around. On the other hand, if the person who says, “Get lost!” is your supervisor, and she is responding to your request for a raise, then you might interpret the relationship level of meaning as indicating that your supervisor regards you as inferior and dislikes your work.

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

Communication is also a key foundation of relationships. We build connections with others by revealing our private identities, listening to learn about others, working out problems, remembering shared history, and planning a future. Marriage counselors have long emphasized the importance of communication for healthy, enduring relationships (Beck, 1988; Gottman, 1994a, 1994b; Gottman & Carrère, 1994). They point out that the failure of some marriages is not caused primarily by troubles and problems or even by conflict. All personal relationships encounter challenges and conflict. A major distinction between relationships that endure and those that collapse is effective communication. In fact, results of a national poll taken in 1999 showed that a majority of Americans perceive communication problems as the number one reason marriages fail—far surpassing other reasons such as sexual difficulties, money problems, and interference from family members (http://www .natcom.org/research/Poll/how\_americans\_ communicate.htm). Communication is important for more than solving problems or making disclosures. For most of us, everyday talk and nonverbal interaction are the very essence of relationships (Barnes & Duck, 1994; Wood & Duck, 2006). Routine talk between intimates continually weaves their lives together. Unremarkable, everyday interaction sustains intimacy more than the big moments, such as declarations of love or major crises. By making small talk, sharing news about mutual acquaintances, and discussing clothes, furniture, and other mundane topics, partners keep up the steady pulse of their relationship (Duck, 2006; Wood, 2006a, 2006b). For this reason, many couples involved in long-distance romances say one of the biggest problems they encounter is not being able to share small talk.

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

Communication skills are important to the health of our society. To be effective, citizens in a democracy must be able to express ideas and evaluate the ideas of others. One event typical of presidential election Iyears is a debate between or among candidates. To make informed judgments, viewers need to listen critically to candidates’ arguments and their responses to criticism and questions. We also need listening skills to grasp and evaluate opposing points of view on issues such as abortion, environmental policies, and health-care reform. To be a good community member, you need skills in expressing your point of view and responding to those of others. In pluralistic cultures such as ours, we interact with people who differ from us, and we need to know how to understand and work with them. Both civic and social life depend on our ability to listen thoughtfully to a range of perspectives and to communicate in a variety of ways. Culture as a term is widely used in academic as well as in daily speech and discourse, referring to different concepts and understandings. While the term originally stems from ancient Greek and Roman cultures (Latin: cultura) it has various dimensions today built from the different needs and uses of each field, be it anthropology, sociology or communication studies. For communication studies, we might start by defining culture as a set of learned behaviours shared by a group of people through interaction. Cultures are not fixed, monolithic entities, but are fluid, always changing and responding to pressures and influences, such as the changing experiences of its members, or interaction with other cultures. However, to its members, the artefacts and even the existence of cultural behaviours and schemas may seem invisible or unremarkable. A culture may even have within it certain subcultures which exist within the main cultural framework of a society, but share within it specific peculiarities or modalities that also set it apart from the mainstream. These subcultures may continue to exist for many years or only a short period of time. They may die out, or may become incorporated into the mainstream as part of this ongoing evolution of culture. While there are specific differences to each culture, generally speaking, cultures share a number of traits, such as a shared language or linguistic marker, definition of proper and improper behaviour, a notion of kinship and social relationship (i.e.: mother, friend, etc), ornamentation and art, and a notion of leadership or decision making process. Culture and society, though similar, are different things. Cultures are defined by these learned behaviours and schemas. Societies at their simplest can be defined as groups of interacting individuals. However, it is through this interaction that individuals develop and communicate the markers of culture, and so in human societies, it is very difficult to separate out ‘culture’ and ‘society.’ And thus we come back to the role of communication within culture. The idea of culture as something that is shared means that it is vital to understand culture and communication in relation to one another. The relationship between culture and communication, in all its forms, is tightly interwoven and interlinked. We can see that communication enables the spread and reiteration of culture. Both communications and the media propagate the values and schemas of a culture through the repeated interaction and exchange enabled by the communications process. Notice the emphasis on repeated there: it is not in single instances of communication that culture is made, but rather in the repeated exchange of information and the reinforcement of the ideals and values it embodies, all conveyed within a particular moment. One way we can think about this complex interplay is by looking at du Gay, et al (1997) notion of the circuit of culture. The circuit of culture is a way of exploring a product of a culture as a complex object that is affected by and has an impact on a number of different aspects of that culture.

MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

Theorists create models to describe how things work. Over the years, scholars in communication have developed a number of models, which reflect increasingly sophisticated understandings of the communication process.

1. LINEAR MODEL

One of the earliest models (Laswell, 1948) described communication as a linear, or one-way, process in which one person acted on another person. This model consisted of five questions that described early views of how communication worked:

Who? Says what? In what channel? To whom? With what effect? A year later, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949) advanced a model that included noise, or interferences, which distort understanding between communicators. Figure 1.1 shows Shannon and Weaver’s model. Although these early models were useful starting points, they were too simplistic to capture the complexity of most kinds of human communication.

1. INTERACTIVE MODELS

The major shortcoming of linear models was that they portrayed communication as flowing in only one direction, from a sender to a receiver. This suggests that speakers only speak and never listen. The linear model also implies that listeners only listen and never send messages. Realizing that “receivers” respond to “senders” and “senders” listen to “receivers” led communication theorists (Schramm, 1955) to adapt models to include feedback. Feedback may be verbal, nonverbal, or both, and it may be intentional or unintentional. Research has confirmed Schramm’s insight that feedback is important. Supervisors report that communication accuracy and on-the-job productivity rise when they encourage their subordinates to give feedback—ask questions, comment on supervisors’ messages, and respond to supervisory communication (Deal & Kennedy, 1999). The interactive model also showed that communicators create and interpret messages within personal fields of experience. fields of experience overlap, the better they understand each other. Adding the concept of fields of experience to models clarifies why misunderstandings sometimes occur. You jokingly put down a friend; he takes it seriously and is hurt. You offer to help someone, and she feels patronized. Adding fields of experience and feedback allowed Schramm and other communication scholars to develop models of communication as an interactive process in which both senders and receivers participate actively.

1. TRANSACTIONAL MODELS

A serious limitation of interactive models is that they don’t acknowledge that everyone involved in communication both sends and receives messages, often simultaneously. While giving a press release, a speaker watches reporters to see whether they seem interested; both the speaker and the reporters are “listening,” and both are “speaking.” Interactive models also fail to capture the dynamism of communication. To do this, a model would need to show that communication changes over time as a result of what happens between people. For example, Mike and Coreen communicated in more reserved and formal ways on their first date than after months of seeing each other. What they talk about and how they talk have changed as a result of interacting. An accurate model would include the feature of time and would depict features of communication as dynamically varying rather than constant. Figure 1.3 is a transactional model of communication that highlights these features and others we have discussed. Our model also includes noise, which is anything that interferes with the intended communication. This includes sounds like a lawn mower or others’ conversations, as well as “noises” within communicators, such as mental biases and preoccupation. In addition, our model emphasizes that communication is a continuous, constantly changing process. The feature of time reminds us that how people communicate varies over the history of their interaction.

SEMIOTICS

Introduction Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning in society. A sign is something which can stand for something else – in other words, a sign is anything that can convey meaning. So words can be signs, drawings can be signs, photographs can be signs, even street signs can be signs. Modes of dress and style, the type of bag you have, or even where you live can also be considered signs, in that they convey meaning. This chapter will introduce the idea of signs, how they function within systems and as tools of communication, and situate signs within codes. Signs and Signifiers • Sign Systems • Semiotics and Communication Processes •

We generally categorize signs into three types:

1. Iconic signs – icons are signs where meaning is based on similarity of appearance. So our drawing of our tree stands in for the notion of ‘tree’ based on a crude similarity of appearance.

2. Indexical signs – Indexical signs have a cause-and-effect relationship between the sign and the meaning of the sign. There is a direct link between the two. So a leaf might be an indexical sign.

3. Symbolic signs – these signs have an arbitrary or conventional link.

The word tree, t-r-e-e only comes to stand in for the notion of tree because of the conventions of our language. In another convention, the symbolic sign for tree might be ‘arbor’ (German) or ‘?’ (Japanese) In each case, the sign can be broken into two parts, the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the thing, item, or code that we ‘read’ – so, a drawing, a word, a photo. Each signifier has a signified, the idea or meaning being expressed by that signifier. Only together do they form a sign. There is often no intrinsic or direct relationship between a signifier and a signified – no signifier-signified system is ‘better’ than another. Language is flexible, constructed, and changeable. de Saussure uses the word ‘arbitrariness’ to describe this relationship. A good example is the word ‘cool.’ If we take the spoken word ‘cool’ as a signifier, what might be the signified? 16 • MEDIA STUDIES 101 In one context or situation, cool might refer to temperature. But in another, it might refer to something as ‘stylish’ or ‘popular’. The relationship between signifier and signified can change over time and in different contexts. This is important, because signs are understood and encoded in context. As with the words ‘’cool,’ the relationship between signifier and signified is made meaningful in context. This area starts by looking at signs in isolation, but as you become more confident with semiotics, you will start to look at signs as part of a sign system.

We can look at signs and sign systems in three ways:

1. Semantics – this is the ‘how’ of semiotics, and is concerned with this relationship between a signified and signifier – the sign and what it stands in for.

2. Syntactics – this refers to structural relations. One structural relation in language is grammar, but syntactics in semiotics refers to the formal relationship between signs that lets them build into sign systems.

3. Pragmatics – pragmatics, according to Morris (Morris, 1938), is the relationship of sign to the person reading or understanding that sign.