

Another Look at Communication Effectiveness

Introduction

The Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute at Baruch College sponsored its Sixth Annual Symposium on Communication and Communication Intensive Instruction on April 28, 2006. The theme was "What is 'Effective?': Assessing Communication in Education and Business."

I was pleased to serve as one of the moderators at the symposium.¹ The conversations and outcomes from the event, along with subsequent thinking, have prompted this additional look at communication effectiveness

Discussion

Opening Points

Effectiveness

ef-fec-tive²

adj.

1.

- a. Having an intended or expected effect.
- b. Producing a strong impression or response; striking: gave an effective performance as Othello.

Efficiency

ef-fi-cien-cy³

n., pl. -cies.

1.

- a. The quality or property of being efficient.
- b. The degree to which this quality is exercised: *The program was implemented with great efficiency and speed.*

2.

- a. The ratio of the effective or useful output to the total input in any system.
- b. The ratio of the energy delivered by a machine to the energy supplied for its operation.

"I believe that we're about to witness what may turn out to be the last competitive frontier business will see. It's going to be a war over the one priceless resource. Time. And when it comes, trust may turn out to be the best investment anyone's made."⁴

"There is nothing more inefficient than making more efficient that which we shouldn't be doing at all."⁵

¹ My preparatory notes for the symposium may be found at <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/storage/schwartz%20symposium%20six.pdf>

² The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition Copyright © 2004, 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Jim Kelly, CEO of UPS, Remarks to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco & Oakland Chamber of Commerce, February 23, 2000.

First impressions are always important. It's worthwhile giving them some attention even though we may modify these on the basis of additional information and further consideration.

These opening points came immediately to my mind.

There is an intimate relationship between effectiveness and efficiency that with the evolution of global business has become increasingly critical. There was a time when one could trade efficiency for effectiveness. I don't believe that to any longer be the case.

I arrive at this point through my own observation and the observations of seasoned executives like Jim Kelly of UPS. Time is the competitive frontier and trust is the preferred weapon.

Trust, of course, requires time to build and time is an increasingly precious resource.

As a consequence, we are led to the need for a deeper understanding of how we invest this increasingly precious resource.

Which brings me to Anthony Zecca's comment regarding inefficiency.

The Perfect Relationship

Consider the following dialogue.⁶

He: "Where did you put it?"

She: "What?"

He: "You know."

She: "Where do you think?"

He: "Oh."

My conclusion is that this is very effective (He found out where it was) and efficient (although I suppose the She could have simply pointed and 13 words would have been reduced to five and a gesture), and trust played a major part in the communication.

We perhaps might question whether the communication needed to take place at all (i.e., the Zecca Rule). But that is not a point I wish to take up just yet.

Effectiveness of Communication

My view is that communication is effective if it achieves the desired outcome.⁷ To prompt action is the most significant of the desired outcomes.

Action suggests that one's ultimate aim is to affect a higher level outcome. For example, in undergraduate education we often give midterm grades. In some cases these cause underperforming students to change their course of action when they realize the likelihood of an unfavorable outcome.

In business we may be seeking to close the sale before our competition can strike.

In my preparatory notes for the symposium I take up the issue of smaller and smaller decision windows.

Time, therefore, plays an increasingly important role in deciding whether or not the outcome is achieved.

⁵ Anthony Zecca, Cohn Consulting

⁶ J. Drogan, Class Notes: TMGT 7300 C Su5 Transportation Management Class 10 June 25, 2005, SUNY Maritime

⁷ In this note I want to use outcome to mean something nontrivial. In my preparatory notes for the symposium I identified the following reasons to communicate: a. To be polite, b. To attract attention, c. To inform, d. To prompt action. I'm considering here that that c and d are nontrivial.

Efficiency of Communication

Efficiency, crudely put, is the ratio of outputs to inputs. When discussing communications this is perhaps better described as the ratio of the odds of achieving the desired outcome to the effort required to achieve the outcome.

"I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."⁸

Herein is posed an issue regarding efficiency. From what point of view should the efficiency of communication be judged? The sender, the receiver, both? One ought to ask the same set of questions with respect to effectiveness.

One might argue that the use of emoticons (i.e., ☺) and SMS text is offensive. For example:

"If we shadows ave ofendd. Thnk bt ths & al is mnded. That u ave but slumer'd ere; whiL thse visNs did appr; & this wk & idel theme; no mre yEldN bt a dream. Gentles, do nt reprehNd; if u pardon we wil mend; & I am honst Puck;"⁹

Some may recognize this from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.¹⁰ But the question here is not one of elegance in the use of the language, but rather efficiency in communication.¹¹

⁸ Mark Twain (American Humorist, Writer and Lecturer. 1835-1910)

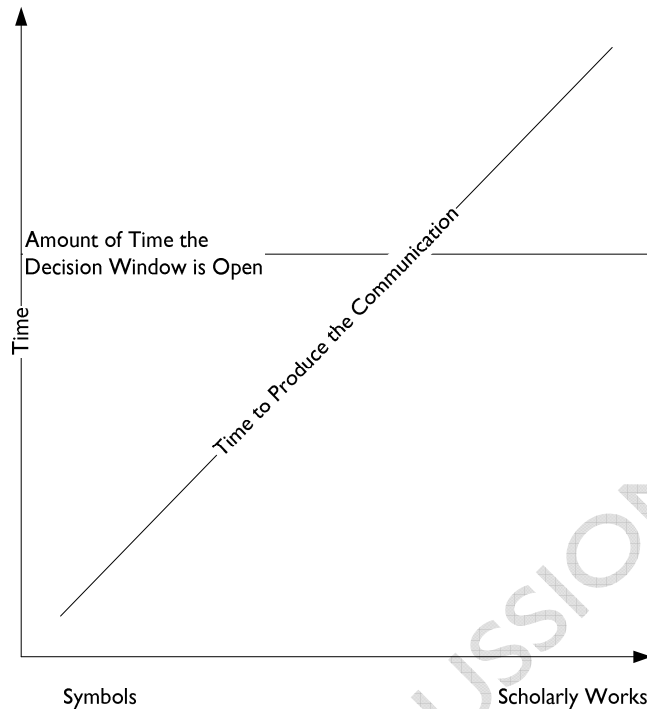
⁹ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Text_messaging, June 10, 2006

¹⁰ *If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
if you pardon, we will mend:
And, as I am an honest Puck,*

¹¹ For another interesting example of the move in to the left see MULTISERVICE AIR-AIR, AIR-SURFACE, SURFACE-AIR BREVITY CODES, April 1997 (<http://www.e-publishing.af.mil/pubfiles/af/10/afjpam10-228/afjpam10-228.pdf>) accessed June 24, 2006

Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Time

One view of the merger of these three aspects of communication is shown here.



The abscissa (communication spectrum) is labeled with Symbols on the left as an example of communications requiring little time to produce¹², and with Scholarly Works on the right as an example of communications requiring relatively more time to produce.

The ordinate represents time.

The diagonal line is the hypothesis that the time required to communicate by means of a symbol is relatively less than the time required to communicate by means of scholarly works. I recognize that the information being communicated in symbols and scholarly works is generally not the same, but assume, for the purpose of argument, that the information in both cases is substantially the same.¹³

The horizontal line represents the time the decision window is open. The size of a decision window is the amount of time one has after an event occurs to affect the outcome. The forces of business are continuing to push this boundary lower in this diagram.

The point here is that as the decision window becomes smaller one is pushed towards the left of the communication spectrum.

Where, in the spectrum, is teaching (e.g., WAC, CAC) concentrated?¹⁴

Outcomes

Perhaps nothing is more important in assuring effectiveness in communication than a clear understanding of the desired outcome.

¹² There is an interesting implied question here regarding the time required to be able to effectively use a symbol.

¹³ An interesting example of this is to consider Einstein where the symbol $E=mc^2$ represents substantial scholarly work.

¹⁴ An interesting topic of discussion would compare and contrast the bandwidth of the sender, the communications channel, and the receiver. A hypothesis is that the most efficient and effective communication occurs when the bandwidths match.

Communications and the Internet

I suspect that all have, at one time or another, been frustrated by an internet search that, no matter our phrasing of the inquiry, did not seem to return useable results. Yet, most of us have met people who seem to be quite good at this task.

Why is that?

Consider the following principles of communication:

- a. The grammar and syntax of the messages being exchanged is easily understood
- b. The information communicated in the messages is relevant
- c. The medium of communication is acceptable
- d. There is a desire to communicate (i.e., to exchange value)

I suspect that the search cognoscenti have a different sense of principles a. and b. than does the average user of net search. Their internet information literacy is better than most.¹⁵

Search is an example of communicating with a "thing" not a person.

"Today, in the 2000s, we are headed into a new era of ubiquity, where the 'users' of the internet will be counted in the billions and where humans may become the minority as generators and receivers of traffic."¹⁶

Communicating with things may be different than communicating with people. Indeed, we may not even know we are communicating. Is this a good thing?¹⁷

If the internet is becoming the throbbing heart of discovery, what needs to be done and is being done, to improve the internet information literacy of the user community? A corollary question deals with the internet adapting to the person.

Conclusions

Communications is undergoing fundamental, irreversible change due to:

1. Time – less and less.
2. Breadth and depth of data, information, and knowledge – more and more.
3. Reach, range, and behavior of information systems¹⁸ – increasing ubiquity, connectivity, and intelligence.

These forces put pressure on traditional ways of communications that results in demand for additional bandwidth. And by bandwidth I mean the notion of comprehension and action not the more traditional definition of the amount of data that can be passed along a communications channel in a given period of time.

Coping with these changes requires increasing skills in discrimination. We might also ask ourselves what is required to effectively use the power of discrimination.¹⁹

¹⁵ For an interesting discussion of this issue see J. Battelle, *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*, Portfolio Hardcover (2005), 1-591-84088-0

¹⁶ Elizabeth Biddlecombe, *The UN Predicts the 'internet of things'*, BBC News, November 17, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4440334.stm>

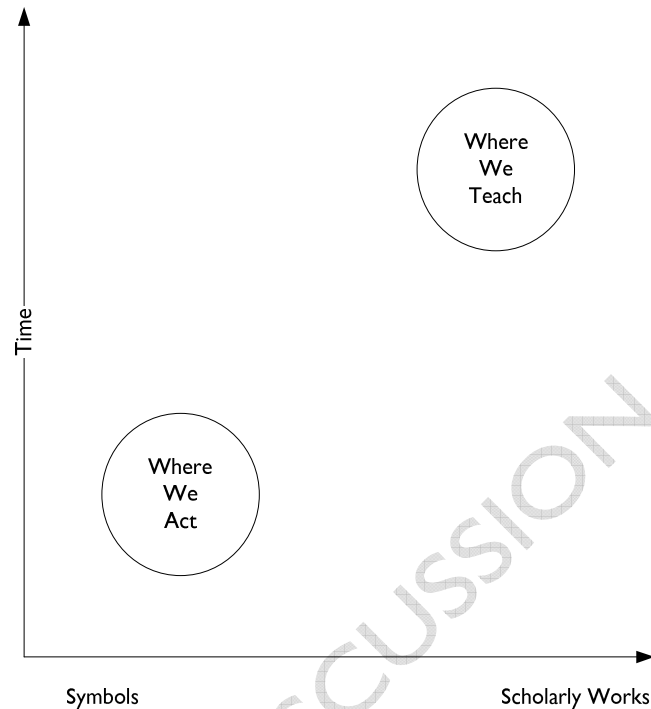
¹⁷ J. Drogan, *A Small View of a Possible World*, September 14, 2004, <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/ideas-and-information/>

¹⁸ Information systems comprise processes, people, and information. In some cases these information systems are improved and/or enabled through the application of technology.

¹⁹ This line is suggested by the June 11, 2006 comment by Joe Ugoretz on cac.ophony.org regarding student experiences with Wikipedia. See <http://cac.ophony.org/2006/06/18/wikipedia-tightens-its-editorial-policies-ever-so-slightly/#comment-1243>

Recommendations

We can agree, I hope, on the need for effective and efficient communications. And as an extension of the first statement, I hope we could agree that the major, but not only, goal of effective and efficient communications is to be able to survive, thrive, and make a difference in that world outside of academia.



1. I've simplified the issues as I see them into two spaces, shown by the circles in the above diagram.
 - a. Where are the spaces?
 - b. What is their shape?
 - c. How are they moving?
2. How do we reshape our teaching to improve the student's ability to perform in the act space?
3. What are the roles and responsibilities of business and academia in resolving the issues?
4. Which existing business and academic institutions are prepared to collaborate to move forward?

Critical comment on the above is invited. ■

James Drogan
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