

## Channels, Audience Needs, and Communications: The Rise of an Idea

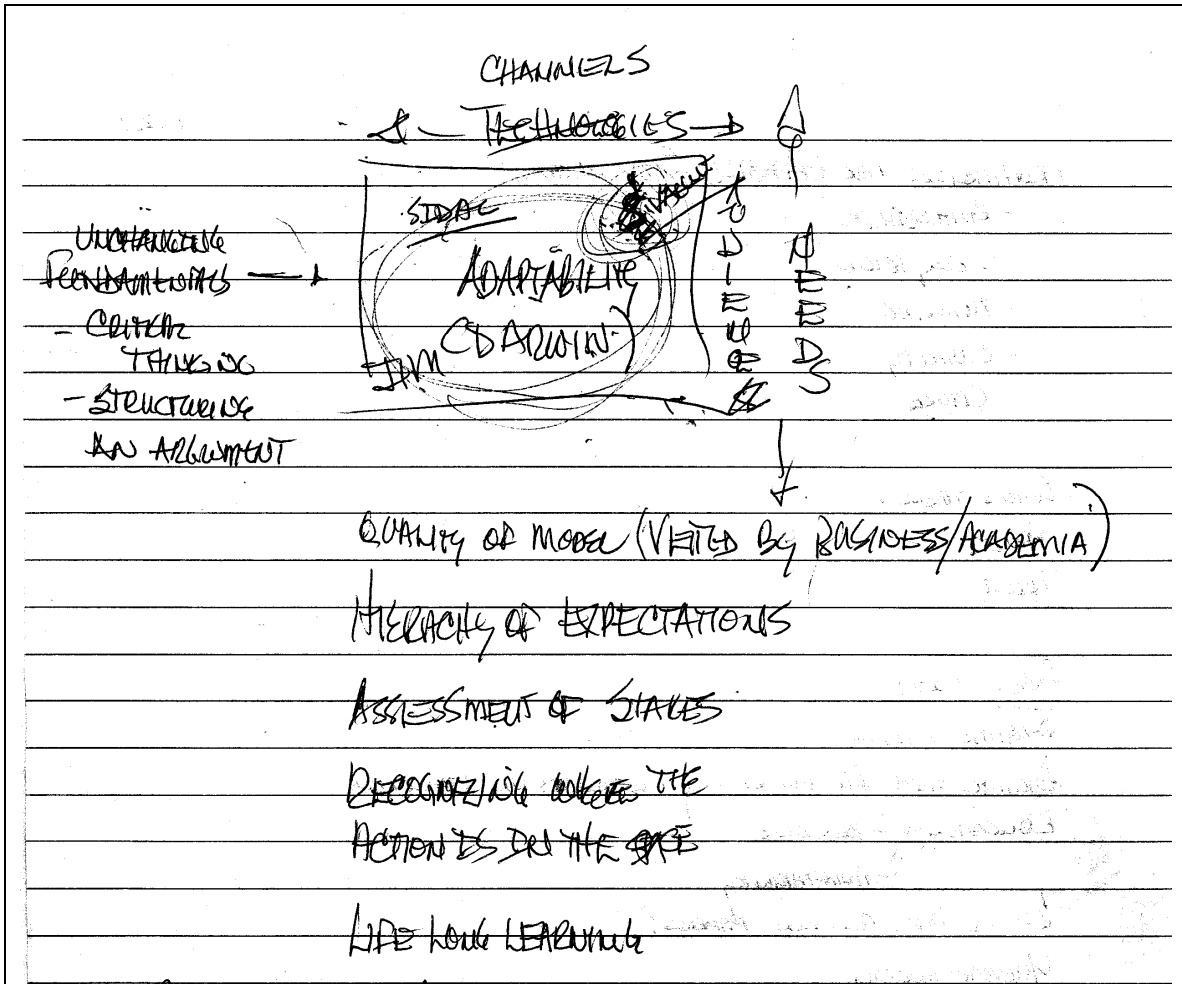


Figure 1 The Sketch<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The Seventh Annual Symposium of the Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute was held April 27 and had as its theme: "New Rules: Convention and Change in Communication."<sup>2</sup>

The value from these symposia is derived from the moderated discussion groups that, in principle, identify an issue in the morning and propose a resolution of the issue in the afternoon.

<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, just the working model. This was edited and produced in a larger size used in the plenary session of the conference. Presumably the version presented has found its way into the files of the Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute.

<sup>2</sup> New Rules: Convention and Change in Communication, January 28, 2007 2007, Baruch College, The Bernard L. Schwartz Communications Institute, <http://faculty.baruch.cuny.edu/blsci/main/symposium2007.asp>, [January 28, 2007].

I was fortunate enough to be one of the moderators at Table 2. Jana O'Keefe-Bazzoni, Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at Baruch College was my co-moderator. Others at the table included:

1. Ginny Rudner
2. Martha Thomas
3. Jana Poazzoni
4. Fred Burke
5. Ben Rohdin
6. Suzanne Epstein

This note is about how this group arrived at Figure 1 The Sketch and, after some reflection on the day, what I think it may mean as an issue in communications.

## The Morning Discussion

A list of question intending to provoke discussion had previously been made available to the table by Mikhail Gershovich, Director of the Institute. Whether or not to use these questions was left to the table. Table 2 opted to consider the theme of the conference -- New Rules: Convention and Change in Communication -- as a hypothesis for discussion.

Did we believe the hypothesis to be true? What evidence could we offer to defend the position we took?

From my contemporary notes I've selected the following phrases that I think carried forward into the afternoon discussion.

1. Contact and connection (between parties in the conversation)
2. Generational gaps
3. Bidirectional communications
4. Power relationships
5. Not new rules, but new channels
6. Universal principles (audience knowledge, adaptability, technology shaping structure, multitasking)
7. Knowledge of what business wants<sup>3</sup>
8. Mobility (of the employee)
9. Stable content, changing channels
10. Rules versus creativity
11. Culturally specific communications

I'm sure my colleagues at Table 2 would have different ideas as to the appearance of this list.

## The Afternoon Discussion

After lunch and an opening afternoon speaker, both of which allowed time for the ideas from the morning to percolate in our minds, we returned to discussion. Its purpose was to delineate the issue and the manner in which the issue might be resolved.

Table 2 was joined by additional people whose names, unfortunately, I didn't record. My notes for the afternoon session are, in fact, completely contained in Figure 1 The Sketch.

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<sup>3</sup> Baruch's Zicklin School of Business is the largest collegiate school of business in the nation and knowing what the employers want seems critical to its success.

The afternoon session was a fast-paced, ideas-on-steroids, give-and-take focused on identifying an issue and proposing approaches to resolution. While I've never speed-dated nor engaged in whitewater rafting, my sense is that these experiences had much in common with Table 2 at full throttle.

What began to emerge from the discussion was the need to describe a context in which to discuss the issue.

There are all sorts of ways in which one might describe the context for communication. A pretty thorough examination of these can be found in the video record of the afternoon plenary session for this conference.<sup>4</sup>

Our discussion of context focused on two dimensions.

- I. Channels. This originally started as technology, but we felt this term was too confining.
  - A. Channels are the "pipes" that connect those involved in the communication. Technology, as commonly understood, may or may not be in the channel.
  - B. Most would agree that the number and type of channels has increased significantly in the last two decades.
- II. Audience Needs.<sup>5</sup>
  - A. It seems as if it would be axiomatic to use this phrase as a definition of the one of the dimension of a context for communication. Indeed, the phrase was introduced early in the afternoon discussion and accepted without further discussion. However:
    1. We often interpret the audience as those out there beyond the footlights. Equally important, however, are those on the other side of the footlights. In retrospect this should probably be renamed participant needs.
    2. The participants increasingly include inanimate objects – things if you will. When things are all that are included in the communication, then maybe we can leave the communications aspects to the technologists. However, whenever a person is included we must not leave the communications to the technologists.

In both cases, channels and what I will henceforth call participant needs, a generally acceptable approach to characterizing and measuring these two dimensions, is required. I consider this a **research need**, but also full appreciate that these definitions may well have already been established.

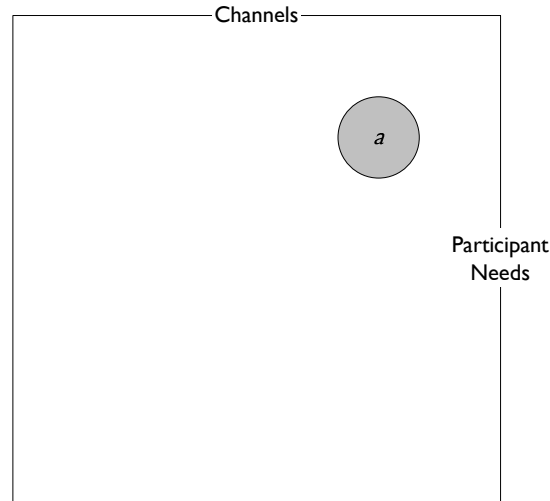
One can then position a population of participants using certain channels and exhibiting certain needs within this context.

Suppose the following.

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<sup>4</sup> The Seventh Annual Symposium on Communication and Communication-Intensive Instruction, 2007, Baruch College Digital Media Library, <http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/dml/engine.php?action=viewAsset&medialIndex=708>, [May 30, 2007].

<sup>5</sup> See Herb Brinberg's closing remarks in Part III of The Seventh Annual Symposium on Communication and Communication-Intensive Instruction for an interesting characterization of audience needs. Another example can be found in James Drogan, 7th Annual Symposium on Communication and Communication Intensive Instruction: "New Rules: Convention and Change in Communication." Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute, April 27, 2007, 2007, <http://jmsdrngn.squarespace.com/storage/Schwartz%20Symposium%20Seven.pdf>, [June 1, 2007]. Principles of Communication, p 1.

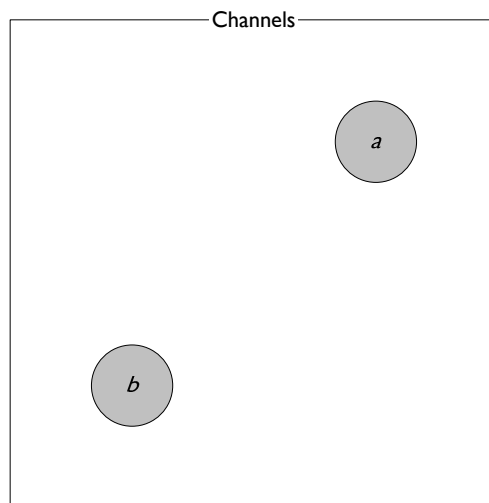


**Figure 2 Intersection of Channel and Participant Needs**

Why should we care about a depiction such as this? Population *a* can also be characterized by a set of knowledge, skills, and experiences related to communication. If becoming a member of population *a* is an ambition of students and the mission of educators, then we need to assure that the students are given the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to participate in that population. We, as educators, may not be prepared to teach this set of knowledge, skills, and experiences.

Malone<sup>6</sup> of Reuters relates how she spent some 70 percent of her time instructing new hires from Baruch on the knowledge and skills required to participate in the population at Reuters. Now one data point does not make a trend, but questions are begged as to whether this is a good use of Malone's time; whether this data point is symptomatic of larger issues in industry; and what, if anything, academia can and should do about it. I consider this another potential **research issue**.

If population *a* represents a target, then, by whatever means we used to determine population *a* we can determine a population *b*.



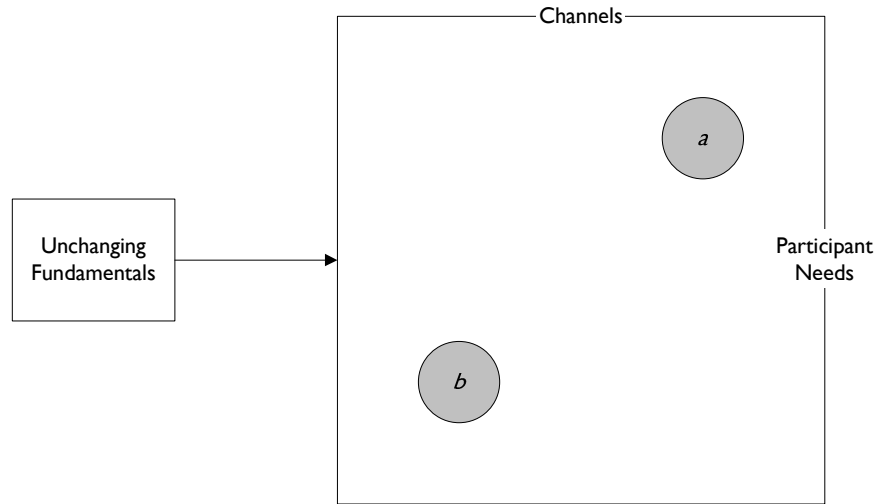
**Figure 3 The Gap**

The gap is our responsibility, as educators, to find a way to cross. We may find that the results of this analysis of the gap requires changes in the curriculum (e.g., less structure in styles of communications),

<sup>6</sup> Virginia L. Malone, Dean, Reuters Academy, Reuters America Client Training, New York.

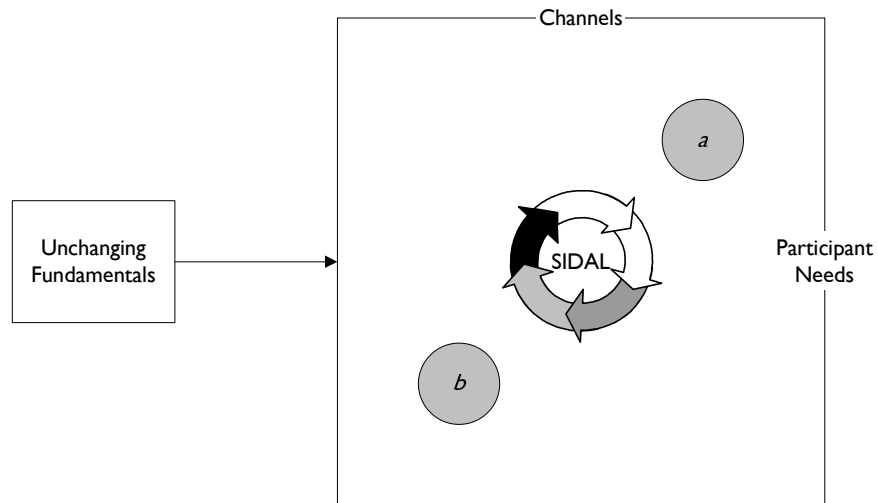
faculty (e.g., more accomplished practitioners) and different means of delivering the pedagogy (e.g., cellphone). Potential resolutions of these issues are likely **research need**.

As Table 2 was moving along two important contributions were made by Thomas and Burke.



**Figure 4 Fundamentals**

Thomas was particularly insistent that, for all of the focus on channels and audience needs, there existed a set of unchanging fundamentals upon which communications rested. Examples include critical thinking and structuring an argument. This suggests that whatever takes place in the context must be clearly linked to these fundamentals. Or, to put it more strongly, we ignore the fundamentals at our peril. A clear statement of these fundamentals may also represent a **research need**.



**Figure 5 Adaptability**

Burke suggested that the context is constantly in flux, buffeted by more-or-less independent changes in channels and participant needs. This says that the person who navigates the context needs to be adaptable. We characterized this as a SIDAL loop.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> SIDAL means sense, interpret, decide, act, and learn. Adapted from Stephan H. Haeckel and Adrian J. Slywotzky, *Adaptive Enterprise: Creating and Leading Sense-and-Respond Organizations* (Harvard Business School Press, 1999) 0875848745.

This need for adaptability strikes me as essential for surviving, thriving and making a difference in the current and emerging world. Identifying what is required to inculcate the capacity for adaptability on the student strikes me as an additional **research need**.

There are other important items needing to be mentioned in conjunction with this context.

1. Sensibility and usefulness. A diagnostic has been proposed above and needs to be vetted by business, the consumer of what we produce, and academia, the production function. Indeed, I would suggest that this vetting is the first amongst a set of **research needs** to be addressed. There is little point in proceeding with a faulty premise.
2. There are stakes (i.e., values) associated with each of the populations in the context and in crossing the gap (i.e., the transformation process is not without its costs). Ways need to be found to unambiguously identify these costs; another **research need**.
3. Recognizing where the action is in the context. The nature of change in the context suggests that “one look and done” is insufficient. Regular looks at the context, noting how the size and locations of the populations, the channels and audience needs change will be required. This leads into the notion of lifelong learning and the means whereby we may instill the passion for this in our students. Another **research need**.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The Seventh Annual Symposium of the Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute was held April 27 and had as its theme: “New Rules: Convention and Change in Communication.” Table 2 reckons that this hypothesis is true and is driven by the changes in the context first laid out in Figure 1 The Sketch.

The evolution of the context had been described in additional detail above. Table 2, in presenting the context, suggests that it is worth of additional investigation. Accordingly, research needs have been identified.

The teacher has two principle customers – the student and the organization that hires the student upon graduation. Surely the capability and capacity for effective and efficient communications is amongst that set of knowledge, skills, and experiences most highly prized by our customers. We need to assure we are delivering what our customers want.

James Drogan  
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June 3, 2007

## Author Notes

1. The shape of this short paper began to take place almost immediately after the conclusion of the symposium. Its completion, for reasons that need not be covered here, was delayed for about a month. My recollection of all that went on and all the contributions made by others undoubtedly dimmed during that time. Omissions and mistakes in properly attributing the contributions of my collaborators at table 2 are regretted and I apologize for them.
2. I welcome any suggested amendments to this document.
3. While it may be obvious, let me restate that I have taken a teacher’s point of view herein.
4. Special thanks go to Mikhail Gershovich, Director, and Herb Brinberg, Chairman of the Business Advisor Council of the Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute; Elizabeth Busch, the symposium organizer; and especially Mr. Bernard L. Schwartz, whose generosity makes all this possible.

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