

Studying Communication: Deepening my Understanding and Insights

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By
Katie Sepa

Dr. Jnan Blau
Senior Project Advisor

Signature

Date

Dr. Bernard Duffy
Department Chair

Signature

Date

Introduction

My time in communication studies has brought so many surprising revelations and freedoms to my life. I have found how giving words to emotions and thoughts can bring a sense of “normalcy” to the everyday situations we call life. In discovering concepts throughout my time as a communication studies student, I have been set free to understand myself and grow further as an individual. This relates to Thomas Kuhn’s statement “familiarity of a subject makes different layers of knowledge possible” (Qtd. in Foss: 24). Such a process has given me the opportunity look deeper into the monotonous occasions we call “life.”

As I began to notice the powerful effect studying communication was having on my life, I knew it was imperative to make something more of it. It wasn’t enough for me to just share bits of knowledge with others; the depth of my experience has been too significant to just let it pass by. Therefore, I have used the opportunity of my senior project to complete this goal of collecting my knowledge and experiences as a communication studies student. This paper is an attempt to further my insight while making it clear for others to understand and appreciate. I hope for many to have similar experiences or at least relate to such revelations. I believe communication is an important area of study for all people, as it brings such applicable and beneficial knowledge and awareness. Therefore, this paper is a collection of what I believe are the most important concepts included in the study of communication.

Each concept or lesson is italicized and contains its own section of the paper. This is to make it clear and understandable for the reader. Each section will include a bit of “my story” along with research to support the significance of such concepts. I have also included ways to apply such knowledge so that others can add insight to their daily life if

desired. I hope that the freedoms I have experienced will inspire readers to question their previous beliefs and ways of thinking. Such a challenge has proven to be quite healthy in terms of being a student and an adult. It has been quite fascinating to see how words have the capability to shed light and bring new life.

Language creates reality

Studying communication has given me the ability and gift of putting words to my everyday experiences and emotions. One of my professors recognized this importance as he said, “once you have a word, we are able to gain deeper understanding and deeper perception” (Skiles). This ability to share understanding, and to dig deeper, allows us the opportunity to see beyond the surface level of things. With this deeper level of perception, I have learned to help others and myself learn to deal with the common occurrences that happen to us everyday. Therefore, a main concept that I believe must be shared is: the power of language creating reality. Richard Vatz, a scholar of rhetoric, states how “situations are rhetorical” and how an “utterance strongly invites exigence,” therefore stating how language creates our “happenings” (Vatz 159). Vatz explains how our situations are *created* by the words we use. This shows the importance in the language we choose because it has the power to create our world. Such a concept was fascinating to me as I saw into the great use of language and our role in using it.

I have heard and learned about language creating reality many times in my communication classes, but it’s the connection to real life experience that makes it so significant. For example, I am an individual who trusts in intuition and feelings most of the time. These are my primary cues that I give and receive from the outside world. Normally, if a conversation or experience doesn’t match up with my mind, heart, or

spirit, I categorize it as “weird.” This limits my further investigation of the situation as I dismiss it as something separate from myself and its importance in my life. However, when given the proper words to describe a situation or a feeling, words can create and alter the reality. I have experienced this many times. As words begin to connect to my everyday experiences, I have less responses that include “weird.” Instead of dismissing them, I begin to feel understood and then have the opportunity to dig deeper into the lessons available for learning. My reality therefore expands and is based more on knowledge than just intuition. This is powerful and, I believe, a key element to maturing as an individual in relationships with people.

An example of this type of freedom is when I first learned about *cognitive complexity*. Littlejohn and Foss describe complexity as “a function of the relative number of constructs and the degree of distinctions you can make” (160). The authors develop this term from constructivism, which is our natural ability to put things into categories. Therefore, cognitive complexity allows us to have many constructions about a single topic. My intercultural communication professor, Dr. Blau, explained this term as the brain’s capability of having two different thoughts or emotions from the same experience. He was discussing his trip to Peru and how much he absolutely loved being there and simultaneously missed his family; therefore, experiencing both emotions simultaneously. The minute he said this, I felt a great sense of relief, and a literal weight off my shoulders.

The idea of being “allowed” to have more than one emotion for an experience was so new to me. It made a lot of previous experiences make sense as I learned how it is “normal” to have more than one emotion. As a young adult, I often find myself having conflicting desires in most of the decisions I make in life, usually regardless of how big

or little the decision is. I find myself wanting both ends of the stick. This is relevantly true in my opinion about my college education. Half of me tends to be really excited to learn new ideas and life skills, while the other half doesn't enjoy the deadlines and pressures that come with each quarter. Before discovering this term, I thought I could only have one feeling or one way of thinking about any given situation. But I found out that this previous belief was false. Cognitive complexity explains that we are able to have different ideas or feelings about something, and that that is allowed. Therefore, learning this term was so refreshing and put my mind at rest with many things.

Learning this new term therefore changed my reality. I am now able to approach life with a different perspective. This is shown in my freedom to have more than one emotion for an experience and in being able to connect that with language, such as the term cognitive complexity. This revelation has also encouraged me to bring the same type of freedom to other people as well. One of my favorite things to do now is to give this term to my friends who struggle with the same type of confusion I had in the past. I am constantly excited to share the news of this term and its reality in our lives. It's impactful to see how language has the ability to recreate our realities and experiences. The linguist Sapir supports this concept as he states how "The relation between language and experience is often misunderstood... [it] actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious protection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience" (Qtd. in Hall: 15). Therefore, language is the tool we use to explain, share, and create meaning. Words have the ability to take the unknown and process it in a way to be understood. The words we choose are significant when realizing the great impact they have on our realities.

This theme has taught me to see beyond a "black or white" perspective when

thinking about things. My natural tendency is to view things in their extreme, i.e. as pass/fail, good/bad, etc. However, the concept of cognitive complexity teaches that there is far more than just one or the other. Its application therefore allows for so much more opportunity and clarity in our everyday lives. In essence, thinking with color opens up new perspectives and realities. This is why this term has become so important to me; it has expanded my narrow view of the world and its possibilities. I now know that there are more than just extreme options in ways of seeing and thinking about things. More often than not, there are words to explain what else can be happening or lying in the middle. Language opens the mind to seeing beyond the limited with the ability to create new realities.

Language is separate from thought

A reoccurring theme in communication studies is the ability and skill to see past the ordinary and surface level of things. Though language has the ability to create our realities, it is *also* a separate entity in itself. For example, a concept and discussion that I have really enjoyed learning about is the idea of linguistics and how language is in essence separate from thought. I first was exposed to this idea through reading *Beyond Culture* by Edward T. Hall. Hall notes humans' close relationship with language as he writes "Along with tool making, language is one of the extension systems that most characterizes human beings-regardless of their stage of economic and political development" (169). This close relationship of language and our minds is often perceived as one in the same. However, Hall points out that language is actually a system in itself when he writes "The gradual evolution of language was one thing, the realization that language is a system is another" (169). Hall emphasizes how language is often

confused as thought because of its connection to the development of logic, writing and philosophy, “all of these developments explain why intelligence is so closely connected in men’s minds with verbal facility”(169). He is passionate about the difference of language and thought as he says; “folk believe that you can’t think unless you can put it into words” (170). He goes even further to state that “both Whorf and Sapir fell into the ET trap. That is, they believed language *was* thought. In a sense, they were correct if one looks only at the incredible influence that language exerts on thought” (31). In this, he challenges the reader to view language as a separate system to that of human thought.

Before reading this, I had never analyzed language so intricately. But, once I started thinking and pondering on this idea, I was blown away by the fact of it. I have always been someone who thinks in words. If someone says my name or is talking to me, I often see the name or conversation visually appear in words within my mind. Therefore, I never thought that language could be separate from thought. But as I started asking others, I found out that most people did not receive the same visual word appearances as I did. Some people think in pictures, others in art, and/ or concepts. This proved thought and language to be two separate entities. Thus, this concept has expanded my knowledge of communication, in realizing it is so much more than language itself. Language is only one of the ways we use to share meaning.

To illustrate, when traveling to other countries, a language barrier is often present. But that only goes so far, as we are able to communicate nonverbally through gestures, drawings, and sounds. I also found it fascinating in my intercultural communication course when we studied the lack of certain tenses/words within other languages. A video showed in this class revealed that some languages don’t contain a future tense, making their reality and perception of time very different from ours. I couldn’t believe this at first

but soon realized that the missing tense in their language shows how language is a separate system from thought. This concept has made me ponder more about my personal trust in intuition. Though I have experienced how words have brought my emotion to life, I am also challenged to see the value in the emotions themselves. Relating the idea that thought is an entity in itself, reveals strength in the emotions even before words can be connected to them. Thus, I can admire the use of language and its ability to create, as well as knowing that something can exist without it. Along with continuing to notice how words bring comfort, I can also value and trust my initial emotions as communication. Therefore, Hall's insight on language broke down previous assumptions and challenged my way of thinking.

The ability that language has to *both* create our realities *and* be separate from thought is a concept that was also introduced to me as a student of communication studies. Dr. Blau continually emphasized how *both* can and do exist. This *both/and* concept has been incredibly challenging and eye-opening. It reveals how little we can categorize things because of the great intricacies within them, such as the art of language. But in that, limits are surpassed in realizing the capacity of many things existing. This *both/and* approach forces me to see beyond my natural "black or white" perspective because education has proven that there is so much more that lies in between, and discovering such is quite rewarding.

Culture

My media criticism professor, Dr. Skiles, also expressed his knowledge on the subject of language and reality, saying "language itself produces thought, there is really no such thing as individual meaning in a shared, social system such as language." This

answer and point of view also added to my scope of language and its connection to culture. My idea of culture has increasingly altered and been adapted to during my time as a communication studies student. For example, I initially looked at culture with a negative connotation. I saw culture with the lens that I now perceive as the power of the media. I believed it to be controlling, confining, and separate from myself as an individual. However, as I began to study the truth of this term, I realized that it was not what I had previously thought.

I have learned that culture is necessary and advantageous in order to perform well in our society. Dr. Skiles heavily contributed to this understanding and conclusion. In one sense, he agreed that it is important to not let culture control you, but he emphasized the imperativeness of culture in our everyday lives. He explained how “we need culture to help us know how to function with people. It allows people to have common ground and a place to relate.” Therefore, culture aids us in our ability to develop relationships with others. Examples of this include knowing what to wear each day and what conversations to engage in and how (Martin and Nakayama). Thus, culture is also present, existent, and makes us who we are. This conclusion is supported in *Beyond Culture* when Hall states, “In fact, what gives man his identity no matter where he is born- is his culture, the total communication framework: words, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, etc.”(42). Cultures inevitable influence on our lives is beneficial as it helps us to belong and share meaning.

Thus, my initial stigma towards culture ever changed. I still hold the passion to seek individuality but now with a respect that we *need* culture as well. I have learned that I can still keep my sense of “individuality” while acknowledging the benefits of culture and its role in my life. Hall advises to “seek out the systems that are different from one’s

own and using oneself as a sensitive recording device, making note of every reaction or tendency to escalate (51). This emphasizes the importance in experiencing new cultures. In this way, we can value the differences and see the role our culture plays in our lives and in the lives of others. This will help distinguish what is us and what is culture.

Critical Thinking and Educated Awareness

Similar to studying culture and realizing its benefits to my identity and relationship with others, I have also learned how to approach media with a more educational perspective and awareness.

Neil Postman writes, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, “the concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression” (22). He describes how media acts as an epistemology, or as a way of knowing. His research and opinions along with other authors have revealed how much media affects us as humans, and thus our identities. If we look around to today’s culture, we will see how much our social media and technologies have an impact on what we do and who we are.

I have had a skeptical view about the media since learning about it during my U.S. history class in high school. I categorized it as negative, biased, and self-seeking as I became educated on the corruption within it. I became aware of the deceptive messages that allured people, such as myself, into extreme consumerism. Experiencing such led me to be highly critical of media and frustrated with the amount of people that buy into it. As I took the courses of Media Criticism and Technology and Human Communication, I started realizing how much power the media has in controlling what we think, feel, and do. I realized how the majority of people were unaware of this power, which easily molded them as a passive audience/consumer. It also made me question how much our

thinking was really our own? This primary passion on the subject has deeply impacted my view and approach to dealing with the media and its consequences in our every day lives.

I brought my previous “black or white” perspective into the genre of media criticism as well. I initially could only see the negativity in it, especially as we read critical authors such as Postman and Kalle Lasn, author of *Culture Jam*. I continued to struggle with the amount of power the media had over people, including myself, and the messages that it so willingly spreads on society.

My communication classes and professors have thus encouraged me in questioning as we dug deep and uncovered the actions and consequences of the media. Through this, I have developed into a critical thinker, as Dr. Skiles encouraged me in the questioning and also guided me in the process. Similarly to how we “need” culture, Skiles pointed out the reality of media in our everyday lives. This is supported by Stuart Hall, who writes, “most of us decode messages according to things culturally bound. Meaning is collective and rarely individual” (80). This helped me in dealing with the uncoverings I was encountering, and in the skepticism I was experiencing. For instance, with a heavy critical view on the media, I struggled with the level of participation I wanted to engage in it. Skiles encouraged me that “the issue is that we can’t entirely really escape it all because it is how we learn to come to interact and function with others, i.e. in terms of sociality.” This paralleled with seeing beyond my normal tendency of a “black or white” perspective. I either wanted to accept media or dismiss it altogether. But I learned through my professor and the class that we *do* need to participate in media to still belong with others. Skiles further explained, “it’s about embracing ‘healthy skepticism,’ not abandoning it on one hand or being entirely consumed by it on the other

hand.” This taught me an incredible lesson as I learned to educationally deal with these passions and convictions I had towards the things in our society, such as media.

As I learned more about this healthy skepticism and educational awareness, I developed a more intense desire to apply such things in my daily life. Therefore, I constantly questioned what action plans I could take in order to fight the social norms of media to some degree. Skiles encouraged me to “first and foremost make better conscious choices and with that, you can better share your message with others.” He also made clear that “in order to apply anything we first need to understand it mostly and let the ideas sink in and then ask ‘with this new awareness what choices and activities can I take that make me happy.’” Therefore, I have taken to heart that in order to really know something, we must understand it, and then we have the option to take a different action because of the new knowledge.

Breaking Associations and Becoming an Active Participant

This leads me to one of the major lessons I have learned as a communication studies student and that is: the goal of bringing one’s unconscious beliefs to the conscious mind, and from there actively make choices and decisions. Stuart Hall writes how the goal of media criticism is to “denaturalize the associations with dominant encoding and encourage consumers of media to read oppositionally” (81). Skiles encourages his students to break our previous associations that we have been told by the media and replace them with our own choices and truths. In Media Criticism, we learned about how much we take our “truth” from the media. This is done quite naturally through our everyday life: the television, the radio, and even the magazines at the supermarket. These are just a few media in which we hear voices telling us who we are and what we want.

Because of this, it is quite natural to have many associations that we believe subconsciously, such as the idea of beauty meaning skinny, flawless, and radiant. Though these qualities are deemed high in our culture, it does not mean that those very words define beauty.

As we read more and discussed more about media's inescapable position in our life, I discovered how much I naturally believed without consciously deciding to believe it. This great shock brought motivation to continue doing research on my own personal life. It surprised me how many associations I have lived under that don't fit my description as truth. However, Skiles taught us that, in being educated as communication students, we now have the power to break such associations, and with such knowledge I have started to do just that. He says we do this by changing the relationship with the "signifier" (what we are told) and the "signified" (the object it relates to). An example of this would be a flag, and how it signifies patriotism, or skinny women portraying beauty. Therefore, in media criticism, we are taught to take a social norm and see it objectively. This allows us to be active, educated consumers, instead of passively accepting every message we hear.

Becoming an educated observer and an active consumer led me to pursue further insight into my identity as an active participant in my daily life. For example, for a long time, my natural tendency, as "Katie," was to honor other's opinions and statements. So much so, that I had a belief that "the other person is always right." Though this belief served me in areas such as education, it did not work well in the area of attaining my own identity. As I started to see how I could have a role in my response to the media, I began to see the reality of having an active role in my relationships with myself and other

people. I have started to take what others say with a more objective perspective, and therefore am more encouraged to have my own voice as a response.

This has greatly benefited my day-to-day life activities and increased the depth and level of my relationships with other people. I greatly related to the author Allison Vesterfelt as she wrote about the freedom to say no and to have an opinion: “No explanation. No defense. No justification for why I couldn’t do the thing someone else wanted me to do. Just the simple exerting of my power into the universe to choose what I wanted, gave me the ability to draw a boundary around myself” (Vesterfelt 50). This is also stated in the study of effective communication, in which, as McCroskey writes, “You might use the ‘no’ principle. This means simply saying ‘No, I am already overcommitted’ (64). This relates to my experience as I began to state my opinion to other people. This often came in the context of needing to speak up for myself and say “no.” Therefore, applying this idea of “having an active role” when interacting with others has started to change my life. This theme is also supported in the novel *Boundaries*, by Henry Cloud, as he states, “The phrases ‘I have to’ or ‘I should’ betray our basic illusion that we are not active agents in many of our dealings” (45). He also discourages passivity as he states, “Certainly we should listen to the thoughts of others and weigh them; but we should never ‘give our minds’ over to anyone” (47). Like Skiles, Cloud encourages individuals to think for themselves. Both professors emphasize the importance of being actively engaged in surrounding messages. Such a lesson has encouraged me to speak up and develop my own voice in society.

I have also applied this lesson to my relationship with technology. Over my time at Cal Poly, I have had the chance to express my opinion on how technology has become such a massive topic, use, and priority in our culture. Similarly to everything else, I find

myself concerned with my relationship with it. I voiced this concern in an email to Skiles, once again voicing my conflict on categorizing it as good or bad. Once again, he affirmed that it is not just one or the other as he said:

“There is "good" and "bad" in all types of communication production and transmission. Text and twitter and email, etc., all offer speed of communication ("good" effects) but they trade off as well with depth of content, grammatical precision, and the ability to gain perspective/time to contemplate ("bad" effects). Consider that what you're focusing on are surface level effects, and not underlying patterns, of power negotiation. Rarely is anything all bad or good, rather "things" manifest both productive and less-productive consequences that often highlight our status in life.

I suspect that what you see as wasting energy has more to do with how you "feel" about the presence/use/consequences of media technology. In other words, the negative, "endless"-ness, you describe sounds like you feel dis-empowered. Feeling overwhelmed and helpless to really control/affect the social pressures to conform (in this case, to media) can often create a sense of uselessness or powerlessness that is more easily translated as indifference or apathy.

If that's the case then consider strategies to regain your power over social media as a tool, rather than as an omnipresent controlling factor in your life. Think of ways to make it your tool, rather than it make you it its tool.”

This email from Dr. Skiles redirected my “black or white” perspective and pointed me in the direction of having an active relationship with my personal media and technologies. I

took him up on his advice and now feel I have more control over my participation and involvement with certain technologies.

The authors Slack and Wise also talk about control in terms of technology in their book *Culture and Technology: A Primer*. Slack and Wise believe that technology deeply affects who we are, writing: “Does it matter who or what a person is when it comes to issues concerning technology? Our answer is an unqualified yes. As we have argued, a technology is not a neutral tool. Rather, technologies are developed and used in circumstances, and for ends, that do not treat everyone equally” (149). Here, Slack and Wise claim that who we are as people matters in our relationship to technology. However, Slack and Wise put more emphasis on the technology and what we do with it, versus it being a part of our complete being. In addition, the authors’ statement that “technology is not neutral” reveals that the way we use technology is the level of affect it will have on us personally. Therefore, both Dr. Skiles and these authors have emphasized the importance of taking an active participant approach in regards to use of technology as well.

Thus, my time spent studying media and technology taught me how to approach my deep convictions with an educated perspective, and also how to be an active agent in them and bring that skill to other areas of my life as well. This relates to how “we cannot change what happens to us, but we can change how we react” (Proctor and Adler 80). With this knowledge, I have developed a new outlook. Instead of looking to separate myself from the complicated things that come my way, I have learned to pause, to process, and then move forward.

Ethnorelativism

Ethnorelativism can be defined as “accepting that there are different ways of seeing the world” (Yang). This word and concept that I learned about in intercultural communication has developed into a consistent theme throughout my time at Cal Poly. I have really enjoyed learning and attempting to put this theme into practice. I definitely feel it can relate and be applied to most, if not every, areas of my life. For example, I first began applying this theme of ethnorelativism to myself when trying to view my culture as a positive aspect on my life versus a negative one. Realizing then that culture is a necessity to function and behave in our daily lives made me more aware of its great importance. In addition, the theme of ethnorelativism has made me more open-minded to the other cultures that surround me. I have learned that I am able to approach things that are different from me with more of an insider’s perspective versus an outsider’s. Before discovering this, I often compared people and things that were different from my personal way as bad, wrong, or not needed. This relates to the common approach of ethnocentrism, “seeing the world through your own culture” or “the view that one’s country is the center of the universe” (McCroskey 143). By contrast, ethnorelativism has given me a new perspective on how to approach situations, with more of an open-minded and other-centered perspective. Practicing this has not only expanded my mind to appreciate new things, but it has also helped me to discover how and why people think and act the way they do. It has given me a new appreciation for the differences in people and life. Instead of ignoring or passing along these differences, I try to appreciate and accept them. I hope this theme is something I continue to dig into and put into practice, whether it is with different people within my culture or different people within other cultures. Not only will this benefit show up in my relationships, but also in my individual understanding and communication.

I have also recently seen how effective it is to apply ethnorelativism to my daily life. For instance, I am a young student with spiritual beliefs. I have had a part-time job at a coffee shop for the past six months that has forced me into challenging situations regarding my personality and faith. For instance, I have gotten to know my coworkers fairly well by spending a significant amount of time with them. Eventually, the subject of faith and spiritual beliefs comes up as we begin to notice the minor differences when comparing lifestyles. I have always thought of myself as playing on “equal ground” when seeing myself compared to others who think differently than me. However, I started to analyze the experiences and situations that occurred at work with more of an academic lens and started to gain some insight into what was *really* happening. I think that even though I wanted to believe I had no previous judgments of other people, I in fact did. This was so in the way my thoughts and words reacted to certain topics. I experienced how “failure to recognize these cultural differences can lead to unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstandings” (McCroskey 143). Therefore, I realized that I tended to have an ethnocentric perspective when dealing with the subject of spiritual beliefs at my workplace. This has led me to a great opportunity to apply the knowledge that initially inspired me in my intercultural course. I now seek to approach such conversations with a more ethnorelative perspective. This way I can appreciate other’s ways of thinking while honoring my own simultaneously. Being able to apply this knowledge to my work life has provided me with more opportunity to listen and grow deeper in my relationships. It has also brought personal freedom as I am now more aware of what is going on and what goal I am trying to achieve.

Digging deeper into ethnorelativism, specifically being open to other’s cultures, personalities, and differences, has connected with my meditation on *perspective*. In order

to accomplish my goal in accepting others for who they are, I have learned that I must alter my *perspective* on my own identity as well as my relationships with others. The dictionary defines perspective as “a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something; a point of view”(Kauffman). In essence, a change in perspective is changing the way we view something. Therefore, perspective can be quite useful to the individual when we realize our ability to choose it. We can *choose* the way we view people, a situation, and life in general. Ronald Adler writes, in *Looking Out and Looking In*: “We can’t control what happens to us but we can control the way we react and respond” (Proctor and Adler 83). I think I always thought this about perspective, but never fully believed it. So often, many people, including myself, blame the world, society, and the media for the way we think about and view things. Yes, they do exert a major influence; but the one who has the most power to change is oneself. Therefore, choosing a different attitude or perspective can change the whole way we view life and how we live it. It will affect the way we communicate and act towards others, positively or negatively, and also within ourselves.

This subject relates to the powerful words that Hall writes in *Beyond Culture*. His chapter on “Culture as Identification” will be one that I will always remember. He focuses on perspective and relationships as he writes, “Until we can allow others to be themselves, and ourselves to be free, it is impossible to truly love another human being” (Hall 238). When looking at perspective and ethno relativism, we see how there is opportunity to see beyond our initial narrow perspectives. Hall digs even deeper into this phenomenon as he suggests the power perspective has in creating intimate relationships and real love. This quote connects this idea of openness and perspective to reveal its great necessity in having real love relationships. This is quite significant when thinking about

its application, about how the ability to let someone be themselves, and allow yourself to be as well, creates the opportunity for intimate relationship and love. What a significant concept, especially when we consider how much love is an important part of our world. This passage makes us realize how important communication is in regards to our closest relationships.

Polychronic versus Monochronic

Another concept I learned about over my years at Cal Poly was the term *polychronic*. We learned about this term as we learned about culture and the differences between some of them. Polychronic is a term to describe how time is perceived, viewed, and valued in a specific culture. Polychronic cultures engage in behavior which includes: “doing many things at once, being highly distractible and subject to interruptions, are in high context, are committed to people and relationships, and highly value relationships” (Chronemics). This way of using time is contrasted with a monochronic perspective, wherein people “do one thing at a time, take time commitments seriously, are low context, and adhere religiously to plans and rules” (Chronemics). Therefore, these two perspectives reveal alternative ways to see and use time.

I personally loved learning about these terms because it brought incredible light to my life. For example, I have always struggled with the high priority in our culture to be on time, to “go-go-go,” and to always be productive. I have noticed that our culture in America, and specifically at Cal Poly, prioritizes a monochronic perspective and way of life. This has bothered me, because I absolutely prefer prioritizing people over tight schedules. I also tend to listen more often to context in what is being said versus just the

words alone. Therefore, my perspective and personality aligns much more with the polychronic way of using time.

As I learned about this concept, I learned once again that my way of thinking was not “wrong.” It was just different and much better fitted with cultures such as China and other collectivistic areas. Realizing that my perspective on time was an actual word and concept brought freedom to my struggle as a student and as an American, in terms of how I use my time. I now find the opportunity to label myself as a polychronic person in a monochronic society. This has helped develop my identity further and also aided my daily activities. I am now aware that my culture prioritizes schedules and commitments, which makes it easier to interact and be in the culture knowing that my priorities will continue to be more about people and context.

This new perspective and outlook has supported my personal philosophy of believing that “life is in the interruptions.” I have also been encouraged to travel and experience other cultures around the world to see first hand the differences in the way people use and prioritize time. Learning this term has made me realize that communication, language, and perception are all interrelated.

Listening

Studying communication has helped me develop the beneficial skill of effective listening. Though it may initially appear simple, I have learned that this part of communication is vital in becoming a competent communicator. In my interpersonal communication course, we discussed how “listening is the best way to show someone you care” (Proctor and Adler 246). That alone shows how imperative this tool of listening is in building relationships with other people. Therefore, it is justified to study this

subject and acquire listening as an individual skill. Adler and Proctor discuss listening in *Looking Out/ Looking In*, and how with listening it is important to: “talk less, get rid of distractions, don’t judge prematurely, and look for key ideas when listening” (Proctor and Adler 246). I have taken such tools and started to apply them in my daily life, especially the idea to “listen for *them* and not *you*.” For example, recently my friend came to me with her troubles and continued to have an emotional breakdown. My normal response to this occurrence is to bring up a similar situation in my life to ensure understanding. However, as I learned these lessons on listening, I decided to try a different way to approach the situation. Instead of responding with a “me” story, I made remarks during the conversation to reveal that I was keeping track. Then at the end, I asked her what she needed, how she felt, and if she wanted advice. This way of responding proved to be much more effective for her and me. She appeared comfortable and at ease as I prioritized her needs above my own. I also felt more at rest as a listener with new awareness of my position and responsibility in the situation. Thus, learning to be this type of listener has allowed for greater conversation and for more authentic relationships. It is also more effective in showing care and trust to others, as the listening intention is far from self-focused.

Learning to listen more effectively has also tied with my education in nonverbal communication. Many of my courses at Cal Poly focused on and included this subject when discussing productive communication. McCroskey writes about the significance of nonverbal communication when he writes, “Many people fail at communication because they are nonverbally illiterate” (McCroskey 33). This is due to the amount of communication that is nonverbal. Albert Mehrban and Ray Birdwhistell state how “60-90% of communication meaning comes from nonverbals” (Qtd. In Proctor and Adler:

201). This piece of information alone invests huge significance into the subject of nonverbal communication. It has taught me individually to pay much attention to people's body language when having a conversation or just trying to get to know them. Edward T. Hall writes in *Beyond Culture* that "The body's messages (in or out of awareness), when read technically or not, seldom lie, and come much closer to what the person's true but sometimes unconscious feelings are than does the spoken word"(Hall 72). Such knowledge has proven to be very helpful in reducing uncertainty in conversations and relationships.

This is also an example of Berger's "uncertainty reduction theory," written in *Theories of Human Communication*, where the individual uncovers information from the participant's nonverbal (Qtd. in Littlejohn and Foss: 180). Watching this reality play out in my daily life has shown me that being aware of the power of nonverbal communication, is like having a secret that most people don't know. Those of us who are aware have the advantage to listen with our ears and eyes. This helps in building more intimate and effective relationships. The more I practice this awareness and develop this skill, the more I see fruit come from it. For example, I have found it to be quite natural to listen more intently with my eyes. This often leads to questioning a person further depending on their tone or look. I find myself saying, "according to your nonverbals, that makes you uncomfortable," or "it looks like you aren't very excited about that decision." This is an example of how "we do communicate our feelings most of the time by our nonverbal behaviors" (McCroskey 42). This is quite true, according to the positive reinforcement and feedback I receive after listening to what people are saying without their words. They often feel cared for and understood as the "meanings are in people, not

messages” (McCroskey 95). Therefore, I believe nonverbal communication awareness is key to building close relationships and developing a strength in listening.

Learning to be an educated listener has also provided me with a more accurate interpretation of conversation and meaning. I now feel more competent in deciphering how other people feel and think. This has become one of my favorite applicable skills from communication studies. I love to “check in” with most people I am in relationship with. Whether it is coworkers, classmates, roommates, or sisters, I seem to be constantly asking and interpreting people’s lives and thoughts. I’ve found this to be quite rewarding and enjoyable. This knowledge comes from Proctor and Adler’s lesson on asking good questions when listening (186). I have noticed that such a skill has developed as a combination of my “people-loving” personality and education in communication. Through such interactions and relationships, I find people opening up and more drawn to intentional communication.

This type of interpretation also seems to produce less miscommunication and misunderstandings. I have seen how listening with more of the senses can provide more accuracy in what is being said. I also have found it easier to pull information that isn’t initially given. This occurs through asking good questions and listening to all the cues provided. An example of this occurred the other day as I was talking to a coworker about his future aspirations. He told me his goal in life was “to not be told what to do.” As I heard these words, I was able to process what he said and respond with the question, “You have strict parents, don’t you.” He was instantly surprised at how I gathered that information from his response. I just listened to what he wasn’t saying. Such situations have produced conversation far beyond what was initially intended. In similar situations, I believe communication creates the reality. As I pay attention more to the person I am

interacting with, the more information I can gather. Sometimes that leads to asking questions that produce answers the participant wasn't even aware of. This type of communication I believe is magical because it is produced new through the conversation. Realities are developed through thought, words, and exchanges. I believe these are the conversations that challenge and really motivate. They are the ones that teachers strive to pour on their students and ones that change lives through challenging previous ways of thinking. Such conversation is a gift produced by attentive listening and applied communication. Therefore, I believe that studying this subject is incredibly beneficial and good for the human soul.

Paradigm Shift

As an individual, I believe that studying communication has provided me with a "better" way to see and approach the world. The dictionary defines paradigm shift as "a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions"(Kauffman). I have therefore experienced my own paradigm shift when comparing my ways of thinking now to my thought-patterns during freshman year. This has occurred as I have been given the knowledge and great tools that have taught me a better way to manage and live through everyday life. I now feel better equipped to handle a variety of conversations and people. Studying communication has also increased my insight with regards to my own self as more of my questions have been answered. I turn more to words for explanations of what is going on versus staring at my own insecurities. Therefore, I am "wrong" less and "free" more as I continue to live with a more developed outlook on life. This significant shift in perspective also relates to an increased self-awareness.

This ability to manage one's emotions and thoughts within interactions is quite powerful. Erving Goffman, a twentieth century sociologist, talks about this very experience, as he says, "When you come into any situation, you put on a presentation or performance-you must decide how to position yourself" (Qtd. in Proctor and Adler: 101). Proctor and Adler, in *Looking Out/Looking In*, discuss how "Goffman begins with the assumption that the person must somehow make sense of events encountered in everyday life. The interpretation of a situation is the definition of a situation. When you enter into a situation, you tend to ask the mental question, 'What is going on here' " (102). This ability to pause and analyze what is happening allows space for the communicator to figure out where to go next in the conversation. It also allows for space to process and listen to what is really going on. I believe this skill is developed while studying communication and with the more practice, the quicker the process. This is an example of McCroskey's statement in *Organizational Communication* that "communication is a learned ability" (McCroskey 19). I believe this self-awareness is an important and vital skill to learn as an adult. This practice allows for mature conversations and relationships, as thought out responses become more common than impulsive reactions. The fruit from such a way of living inspires me to share this knowledge and skill with others, as it has appeared to be quite advantageous. This is shown in how taking time to pause and respond provides much more opportunity for education to exist.

Having an increased self-awareness means that less information between conversations is taken as personal or as an attack. Instead, there is room and opportunity to learn beyond the self and to see what else is really going on. This leads to a tendency to focus more on others providing opportunity to listen, help, and move forward together. Thus, I believe this space of learned self-awareness increases the quality of life for the

individual and the ones they come into contact with. McCroskey explains this well as he states, "it is the quality of communication that is important, not the pure quantity of it" (McCroskey 19). An increased self-awareness therefore leads to a higher level of communication and maturity.

This skill of self-awareness is known to be imperative in the workplace as well. In terms of an organization, we learn that proper self-awareness and cautious self-disclosure provides for a better and more productive work environment. This is supported and revealed in an article on Emotional Intelligence as the author states how "Emotional intelligence is one which every organization has to take into consideration because it will affect the performance of the employees. Once we know how to manage stress, stay emotionally present and aware, communicate nonverbally, and use humor and play, we will be better equipped to handle emotionally-charged situations and catch and defuse many issues before they escalate" (Vezhaven). Therefore, being self-aware can prevent internal conflict as people learn to communicate situations in their own minds before externally processing with others. This can prevent occurrences such as gossip and heated arguments. This is accomplished by bringing a sense to the self, which provides opportunity to grow versus step back. I have learned to apply such a process in the action of pausing. Pausing and processing what is going on during the day can be very beneficial to relationships in and out of work. Therefore, I believe that becoming more self-aware is key to living a full healthy life, both personally and professionally.

Conclusion

The skills I have learned in communication studies have already proven to be quite valuable in my life. I am so thankful for the opportunity to study and learn how powerful the art of communication is to our daily lives. I have also loved developing

skills that have helped me interact better with others, with an increased self-awareness, as well as an other-focused perspective. This has provided an opportunity for quality conversations, relationships, and life. Communication has allowed me to make sense of so much of my previous unknown. The concepts that I have been exposed to have thus altered my perspective on life, as well as impacted my actions. They have also increased my sense of identity, as I can put words to common emotions and experiences. This has brought so much freedom to my life and I hope to be able to share such revelations with others that I come into contact with.

I am not close to mastering these concepts and lessons, but just beginning to apply them to my life has already revealed the power in learning them. I hope to continue my education in communication even after I graduate so that I can further develop my skills and philosophies. This will be a life journey and a life paper that I will continue to add to. The more I experience, the more I can apply my knowledge of communication and search for words to explain occurrences and/or emotions. This way, communication will continue to “be a tool,” and an effective one, as I strive for continual understanding with myself and people (McCroskey 18). My coursework and professors have shown me the gift of looking beyond the surface level of things. Doing this provides greater understanding through a deeper way of thinking. I hope to continue to challenge myself and seek to discover “What else is going on,” and to use words to explain and create realities. This way I can bring the same relief to others that studying communication has given me.

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