

## Why Study Communication?

### **1. Because communication is an irreducible dimension of human species-being:**

i) “One cannot not communicate.” (Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 1967)

ii) “Communication through speech, oral and written, is the familiar and constant feature of social life. We tend, accordingly, to regard it as just one phenomenon among others of what we must in any case accept without question. We pass over the fact that it is the foundation and source of all activities and relations that are distinctive of internal union of human beings with one another.” (John Dewey, *Art and Experience*, p. 348)

### **2. Because communication is constitutive of truth and ideas; communication is the “stuff” of thought:**

i) “Communication is not an ‘expression of thoughts or feelings, which then could only be secondary to them, truth itself is communicative and disappears outside of communication.” (Hannah Arendt, “Concern With Politics,” 1954).

ii) “Because everyone knows the Christian truth, it has gradually become such a triviality that a primitive impression of it is acquired only with difficulty. When this is the case, the art of being able to *communicate*, eventually becomes the art of being able to take away or trick something away from someone.” (Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 1846).

iii) “I speak neither of physics nor theology: with me language is the mother of reason and revelation, its Alpha and Omega... With me the question is not so much: What is reason? but rather: What is language?” (J.G. Hamann, 1730-1788).

### **3. Because communication shows the inhabitation of the social in the psychological and the psychological in the social:**

i) “Communication is not anything like a transportation of experiences, such as opinions and wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another.” (Martin Heidegger, *Sein Und Zeit*, 1927).

ii) “The whole task of psychotherapy is the task of dealing with a failure in communication... We may say that psychotherapy is good communication, between and within men. We may also turn that statement around and it will still be true. Good communication, free communication, within or between men, is always therapeutic.” (Carl Rogers, “Communication – Its Blocking and Its Facilitation,” 1951).

iii) “Transportation is physical, communication is psychical.” (Charles Horton Cooley, *The Theory of Transportation*, 1894)

iv) “When I communicate my thoughts and my sentiments to a friend with whom I am in full sympathy, so that my feelings pass into him and I am conscious of what he feels, do I not live in his brain as well as in my own – most literally?” (Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Logic of Mathematics*, 1896).

#### **4. Because communication is constitutive of social reality:**

i) It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

(Edward Sapir, *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1933, Vol. 9:155–69)

ii) “Besides, the communicating of ideas marked by words is not the chief and only end of language, as is commonly supposed. There are other ends, such as the raising of some passion, the exciting to or deterring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition.” (George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710)

iii) “It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact,’ which it must do either truly or falsely. ... But now in recent years, many things which would once have been accepted without question as ‘statements’ by both philosophers and grammarians have been scrutinized with new care. ...

Examples:

(E. a) “I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)”-as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony.

(E. b) “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth” -- as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.

(E. c) “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” as occurring in a will.

(E. d) “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.”

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. (J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 1962)

### 5. Because Communication is constitutive of society and community:

i) “ ‘Communication’ is a word with a rich history. From the Latin *communicare*, meaning to impart, share, or make common, it entered the English language in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The key root is *mun-* (not *uni-*), related to such words as ‘munificent,’ ‘community,’ ‘meaning,’ and *Gemeinschaft*. The Latin *munus* has to do with gifts or duties offered publicly – including gladiatorial shows, tributes, and rites to honor the dead. In Latin, *communicatio* did not signify the general arts of human connection via symbols, nor did it suggest the hope of some kind of mutual recognition. Its sense was not in the least mentalistic: *communicatio* generally involved tangibles. In classical rhetorical theory communication was also a technical term for a stylistic device in which an orator assumes the hypothetical voice of the adversary or audience; communication was less authentic dialogue than the simulation of dialogue by a single speaker.” (John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, 1999, p. 7).

ii) “The possibility of the occurrence of genuine communication is a broad problem of which the one just dealt with is one species. It is a fact that it takes place, but the nature of community of experience is one of the most serious problems of communication – so serious that some thinkers deny the fact. The existence of communication is so disparate to our physical separation from one another and to the inner mental lives of individuals that it is not surprising that supernatural force has been ascribed to language and that communion has been given sacramental value.” (John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 348)

iii) “Ritual is pre-eminently a form of communication.” (Mary Douglass, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, p. 21).

iv) “But social responsibility is no substitute for symbolic forms and indeed depends upon them. When ritualism is openly despised the philanthropic impulse is in danger of defeating itself. For it is an illusion to suppose that there can be organization without symbolic expression. It is the old prophetic dream of instant, unmediated communication. Telepathic understanding is good for brief flashes of insight. But to create an order in which young and old, human and animal, lion and lamb can understand each other direct, is a millennial vision. Those who despise ritual, even at its most magical, are cherishing in the name of reason a very irrational concept of communication (Mary Douglass, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, p. 50).

iv) “Basil Bernstein is a sociologist whose thought descends through Durkheim to Sapir. His special concern is to discover how speech systems transform the experience of speakers. ... Bernstein very cogently distinguishes his argument from that of Whorf (1941) and others who have treated language as an autonomous cultural agent and failed to relate its formal patterns to the structure of social relations. Indeed, before Bernstein it was difficult to see how such a relationship could be established. For certainly, in large areas of its internal development, language follows its own autonomously given rules. It is not surprising, as he has alleged (1965), that contemporary sociologists often seem to ignore the fact that humans speak, unless the sociologists are specially concerned with speech, in which case they emphasize its integrating or divisive functions. Speech tends to be treated as a datum, something taken for granted. If it is true that the analysis of speech as a social institution (one as basic as family and religion) has scarcely been broached, anthropologists are in no way to feel smug about the analysis of ritual. They do not make the mistake of neglecting this field; nor do they suppose that ritual is merely divisive or integrative in social relations. The data are piled up in great stacks of analysis of particular tribal symbolic systems which express the social order. But why some tribes should be pious and others irreverent or mercenary, why some are witch-ridden and others not, are questions which have only been entertained in sporadic fashion. As for the deeper question of whether symbolic forms are purely expressive, merely ‘the means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection’ as Sapir put it, or whether they interact on the social situations in which they arise, and whether their effect is constraining and reactionary—these questions are not systematically approached. Still less have anthropologists developed a frame of discourse in which their tribal studies can be related to ourselves. This is the point at which a revolutionary insight into language as a social process can help us.” (Mary Douglass, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, pp. 21-22).

#### **6. Because communication is constitutive of subjectivity:**

“Just as he relies on the conventions of logic to deduce the solution to this dilemma, so she relies on a process of communication, assuming connection and believing her voice will be heard.” (Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, 1982).

## **7. Communication is constitutive of ideology:**

i) “Familiarity has been breeding overtime in our mottoes, producing everything from contempt (according to Aesop), to children (as Mark Twain observed). Polonius, amidst his loquacious wanderings, urged Laertes to seek friends who were ‘tried and true,’ and then, having chosen well, to ‘grapple them’ to his ‘soul with hoops of steel.’ Yet, as Polonius’s eventual murderer stated in the most famous soliloquy of all time, ‘there’s the rub.’ Those hoops of steel are not easily unbound, and the comfortably familiar becomes a prison of thought.

Words are our favored means of enforcing consensus; nothing inspires orthodoxy and purposeful unanimity of action so well as a finely crafted motto — ‘Win one for the Gipper,’ and ‘God shed his grace on thee.’ But our recent invention of speech cannot entirely bury an earlier heritage. Primates are visual animals par excellence, and the iconography of persuasion strikes even closer than words to the core of our being. Every demagogue, every humorist, every advertising executive, has known and exploited the evocative power of a well-chosen picture. Scientists lost this insight somewhere along the way. To be sure, we use pictures more than most scholars, art historians excepted. ‘Next slide please’ surpasses even ‘It seems to me that’ as the most common phrase in professional talks at scientific meetings. But we view our pictures only as ancillary illustrations of what we defend by words. Few scientists would view an image itself as intrinsically ideological in content. Pictures, as accurate mirrors of nature, just are.

I can understand such an attitude directed toward photographs of objects – though opportunities for subtle manipulation are legion even here. But many of our pictures are incarnations of concepts masquerading as neutral descriptions of nature. These are the most potent sources of conformity, since ideas passing as descriptions lead us to equate the tentative with the unambiguously factual. Suggestions for the organization of thought are transformed to established patterns in nature. Guesses and hunches become things. The familiar iconographies of evolution are all directed – sometimes crudely, sometimes subtly – toward reinforcing a comfortable view of human inevitability and superiority.” (Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life*).

## **8. Because communication is constitutive of affect, moral sentiments, and ethics:**

i) “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from or even contrary to, our own.... Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth, and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition.” (David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1740).

### 9. Because communication is an alternative to violence:

i) "One might say, those relying on the fear of force are not obliged to engage in a lot of interpretative labor, and thus, generally speaking, do not. This is not an aspect of violence that has received much attention in the anthropological literature on the subject. The latter has tended instead to emphasize the ways that acts of violence are meaningful and communicative. It seems to me this is an area where we are particularly prone to fall victim to the confusion of interpretive depth and social significance: that is, to assume that the most interesting aspect of violence is also the most important. This is not to say that acts of violence are not, generally speaking, also acts of communication. Clearly they are. But this is true of any other form of human action as well. It strikes me that what is really important about violence is that it is perhaps the only form of human action that holds out even the possibility of having social effects *without* being communicative. To be more precise: violence may well be the only form of human action by which it is possible to have relatively predictable effects on the actions of a person about whom you understand nothing. Pretty much any other way one might try to influence another's actions, one at least has to have some idea who they think they are, who they think you are, what they might want out of the situation, their aversions and proclivities, and so forth. Hit them over the head hard enough, all of this becomes irrelevant." (David Graeber, "Beyond Power/Knowledge: An Exploration of the Relation of Power, Ignorance and Stupidity.")

ii) "Is any nonviolent resolution of conflict possible? Without doubt. The relationships of private persons are full of examples of this. Nonviolent agreement is possible wherever a civilized outlook allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement. Legal and illegal means of every kind that are all the same violent may be confronted with nonviolent ones as unalloyed means. Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust, and whatever else might here be mentioned, are their subjective preconditions....Its profoundest example is perhaps the conference, considered as a technique of civil agreement....This makes clear that there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of 'understanding,' language" (Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978. 289).

## 10. Because communication is imbricated in violence:

“The main topic I’d like to talk about today, however, is language and violence. In our common sense, we often speak as if violence and language were mutually exclusive. We think one begins where the other ends: when people stop talking, they start fighting, when they stop fighting they start talking. We see violence and words, violence and language, in complementary distribution. We also think of violence as often that which is beyond language. People often describe war as being beyond words. But violence actually is almost always accompanied by language. One of the reasons why language cannot grasp violence, I think, is that it is usually embedded in it. When violence occurs, it seems to rely much of the time on a discursive accompaniment that assigns the violence its meaning. Such verbal framing marks the social character of violence. Anthropologists say that aggression is biological, violence is social. It seems to me that very often the accompanying language gives violence its social meaning, gives it its social character. So even though violence might erupt when dialogue stops, language is usually there as an accompaniment to violence. This is also true in the case of torture. Elaine Scarry’s famous book, *The Body in Pain*, describes torture as the thing beyond language, that which breaks past the possibility of language. But in fact, as testimonial texts reveal, torture is almost always accompanied by a verbal commentary that assigns it a social or interpersonal meaning. For example, torture may be accompanied by interrogation, and the relation between them works both ways. Torture can be an instrument for interrogation, but it’s just as common I believe that interrogation is the alibi or the pretext for cruelty.” (Mary Louise Pratt, “Violence and Language.”)

## 11. Because communication marks the limit of human sociality:

i) “The theme of solitude and the breakdown of human communication are viewed by modern literature and thought as the fundamental obstacle to human brotherhood. The pathos of socialism breaks against the eternal Bastille in which each person remains his own prisoner, locked up with himself when the party is over, the crowd is gone, and the torches extinguished. The despair felt at the impossibility of communication ... marks the limits of all pity, generosity, and love... But if communication bears the mark of failure or inauthenticity in this way, it is because it is sought as fusion.” (Emmanuel Levinas, “The Other in Proust,” 1947).

ii) “For in this world, communication is never an absolute (only angels communicate absolutely); and a deficiency in one point in a given communicative system may show as a proficiency at some other point (somewhat as a persons deprived of sight may become more acute in hearing or touch).” (Kenneth Burke, “Introduction,” in *Permanence and Change*, 1953).

## 12. Because communication marks the limit of meaning:

“Is it certain that to the word communication corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable? Thus, in accordance with a strange figure of discourse, one must first of all ask oneself whether or not the word or signifier "communication" communicates a determinate content, an identifiable meaning, or a describable value. However, even to articulate and to propose this question I have had to anticipate the meaning of the word communication: I have been constrained to predetermine communication as a vehicle, a means of transport or transitional medium of a meaning, and moreover of a unified meaning. If communication possessed several meanings and if this plurality should prove to be irreducible, it would not be justifiable to define communication a priori as the transmission of a meaning, even supposing that we could agree on what each of these words (transmission, meaning, etc.) involved. And yet, we have no prior authorization for neglecting communication as a word, or for impoverishing its polysemic aspects; indeed, this word opens up a semantic domain that precisely does not limit itself to semantics, semiotics, and even less to linguistics. For one characteristic of the semantic field of the word communication is that it designates nonsemantic movements as well. Here, even a provisional recourse to ordinary language and to the equivocations of natural language instructs us that one can, for instance, communicate a movement or that a tremor [*ebranlement*], a shock, a displacement of force can be communicated—that is, propagated, transmitted. We also speak of different or remote places communicating with each other by means of a passage or opening. What takes place, in this sense, what is transmitted, communicated, does not involve phenomena of meaning or Signification. In such cases we are dealing neither with a semantic or conceptual content, nor with a semiotic operation, and even less with a linguistic exchange.” (Jacques Derrida, *Signature Event Context*)

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**14. Because aesthetic texts and performances are forms of communication:**

i) “Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving: it is ever still the light of life.” (Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, 1821).

ii) And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”  
(T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, 1936).

iii) “To the extent that the last works of art still communicate, they denounce the prevailing forms of communication as instruments of destruction, and harmony as a delusion of decay.” (Max Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture,” 1941).

**15. Because the discipline of Communication Studies has a deep and rich tradition:**

i) “To start with the first of these, rhetorical culture was focused on producing persuasion through the medium of correct, aesthetically attractive, and effective speaking. Rhetorical training, then, meant the study of language in all its aspects, but also the inculcation of certain aesthetic, moral, and political values that were considered part of being a persuasive speaker. ... Although the basic structure of the discipline of rhetoric and its teleological orientation were practical and political, this did not exclude the development of some kinds of theoretical analysis and relatively disinterested criticism as a subordinate part of rhetorical culture. Thus, in several early Platonic dialogues, particularly the *Protagoras*, we see Plato making fun of teachers of rhetoric who give way to an obsession with correct linguistic usage, subtle semantic differences, and a kind of morally edifying but, Plato claims, fundamentally insubstantial and unsound literary criticism.

The second important fact is that this rhetorical training was not, contrary to the propaganda of Plato, originally just a technique for unscrupulously manipulating people. To put it in somewhat later terminology, the original project of rhetoric was to teach something both inherently valuable and instrumentally valuable. It was inherently valuable because it made those who learn and practice it good, beautiful, and self-confident (and these are values in themselves), and it was instrumentally valuable because it was useful in helping one get one’s way politically. It was precisely this orientation toward human improvement, not just effective instrumental manipulation, that made some of the original forms of rhetorical training such an easy target for Plato’s criticism. Plato was terrified by what he took to be the potentially subversive (“democratic”) political possibilities of rhetoric: *anyone* who could pay the fees, *regardless* of their genealogy and family connections, could learn the art of speaking persuasively from professional teachers of rhetoric. Nevertheless, Plato couches his criticism in epistemological terms. If the study of rhetoric really makes people better, he argues, then surely its teachers must be able to explain what the human good is and how the study of rhetoric conduces to helping people attain it. This is part of Plato’s general argument that you cannot be performing an activity well unless you can explain why you are doing every component part of it in the way you are, and you can’t do that unless you

have the correct general theory. Since rhetoricians were basically inculcating skills in practical public speaking, secondarily developing certain ways of interpreting literature, and had some theories about some things (such as the correct order of the parts of a speech) but no general theory of the human good, Plato's conclusion is that they did not really know what they were doing and hence could not be doing it well, except, as he condescendingly sometimes adds, by accident (*Ion* 542 a).

Seen retrospectively from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, there seems nothing extravagant in the claims of professors of rhetoric that they were making those whom they taught "better people"; after all, they were making them more able to participate effectively in public debate and in the common political life of their respective cities, and that might perfectly well be considered a good. Isn't Plato's Protagoras in some sense right to say that a human capable of taking part in sociable common life is better off than one condemned to a life of solitude, isolation, and silence? Similarly, there seems nothing outrageous in claiming that one is benefiting people (and their cities), even though one cannot specify by reference to a general theory in exactly what way that is occurring. Given our complete inability despite over two thousand years of effort to agree on a theory of "the good" that would have satisfied Plato, it seems highly rash to continue to claim that possession of such a theory is a precondition for any stable form of good practice." (Raymond Geuss, "Goals, Origins, Disciplines," *Arion* 17.2 fall 2009)

ii) "...[P]robably the oldest form of 'literary criticism' in the world [is] known as rhetoric. Rhetoric, which was the received form of critical analysis all the way from ancient society to the eighteenth century, examined the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve certain effects. It was not worried about whether its objects of enquiry were speaking or writing, poetry or philosophy, fiction or historiography: its horizon was nothing less than the field of discursive practices in society as a whole, and its particular interest lay in grasping such practices as forms of power and performance. This is not to say that it ignored the truth-value of the discourses in question, since this could often be crucially relevant to the kinds of effect they produced in their readers and listeners. Rhetoric in its major phase was neither a 'humanism,' concerned in some intuitive way with people's experience of language, nor a 'formalism', preoccupied simply with analyzing linguistic devices. It looked at such devices in terms of concrete performance - they were means of pleading, persuading, inciting and so on - and at people's responses to discourse in terms of linguistic structures and the material situations in which they functioned. It saw speaking and writing not merely as textual objects, to be aesthetically contemplated or endlessly deconstructed, but as forms of activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences, and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they were embedded.

.... There was, of course, a reason why rhetoric bothered to analyze discourses. It did not analyze them just because they were there, any more than most forms of literary criticism today examine literature just for the sake of it. Rhetoric wanted to find out the most effective ways of pleading, persuading and debating, and rhetoricians studied such devices in other people's language in order to use them more productively in their own. It was, as we would say today, a 'creative' as well as a 'critical' activity: the word 'rhetoric' covers both the practice of effective discourse and the science of it." (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 179).

**16. Communication in the disciplines:**

i) “I’ve always thought the what I fundamentally teach is speech.” (Stanley Hauerwas, “Forming the Scriptural Imagination.”)

ii) “Theology means “words about God.”

iii) “Confessional theology is talking about God by using agreed-upon statements of belief. First of all, to be “confessional” means to believe and speak in a way in which the Christian Church has formally agreed and published in written statements of belief. At one time, most all of Christendom was “confessional” in that it confessed the Nicene Creed (although East and West argued about whether or not the Holy Ghost proceeded from Father or from Father and Son).” (Walter Snyder)