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An Overview of Communication

Can you think of anything important in your life that does not involve communication? In reality we do not think it is possible for anyone to legitimately come up with any aspect of life that does not involve communication and that would not be made better by the ability to understand communication more thoroughly. Just consider some of the areas covered in this book. You will have the opportunity to examine such topics as friendships and romantic relationships, media, technology, cultures, personal and public influence, families, health care, and the workplace. You will learn about how your communication and the communication of others influence and actually develop these and many other areas of your life.

We are passionate about the study of communication, and we believe very strongly that you can benefit from knowing more about how communication works. We wrote this

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Explain how communication is symbolic.
2. Explain how meaning is established.
3. Explain how communication is cultural.
4. Explain how communication is relational.
5. Explain the use of communication frames.
6. Explain what it means to view communication as both representational and presentational.
7. Explain what it means to view communication as a transaction.

book partly because we believe that everyone needs to know more about communication. *Communication in Everyday Life* will help you better understand—and even improve—your life through better understanding of communication.

Within this initial chapter, we will examine what communication entails. You will likely discover that something you have been doing all of your life is more complex than you might think. You will also discover that communication is more than just sending and receiving symbols (something we will soon discuss). It is actually a lot more than just sending and receiving symbols, and this chapter will establish the foundation for fully understanding the importance and impact of communication in your life. To get things started, we will discuss two primary features of this textbook: *everyday communication* and the *relational perspective*.

Everyday Communication and the Relational Perspective

One thing making this book different from other communication textbooks is its focus on *everyday communication*. The discipline of communication has traditionally focused on the “big” moments or seemingly extraordinary events of human interaction. These instances include initial encounters, betrayals, disclosure of secret information, family upheavals, and other dramatic experiences you may occasionally encounter during your lifetime. These events may be memorable, but they do not make up much of a person’s lived experiences. For instance, romantic relationships only rarely feature moments in which partners hold hands, gaze into one another’s eyes, and share their deepest darkest secrets and declarations of unending love.

In actuality, most interactions of romantic partners are of the everyday, seemingly ordinary, or even seemingly dull variety. This everyday communication might include brief conversations as they get ready for work or school, a quick text between classes or during a break, talking while eating a quick lunch, or FaceTiming while watching videos online. The content of these conversations is seemingly mundane and may include



Is the connection between relationships and communication really that significant?
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topics such as schedules, weather, what to eat, what to watch online, what bills need paying, or even the source of a foul odor.

Everyday communication may not always be memorable, but it happens to be incredibly important. Major portions of a person's life take shape through routine, seemingly mundane everyday communication. Everyday communication creates, maintains, challenges, and alters relationships and identities as well as culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, meaning, and even reality. Everyday communication should be studied not just because of its frequency in our lives but also because extraordinary things happen through everyday communication. We are not saying that big moments are not worthy of attention, and we will occasionally talk about those as well. However, when discussing all types of communication, we will continuously interconnect them with your everyday life and experiences.

Something else that sets this book apart from other communication textbooks is the relational perspective that we have developed through our books and research. The constant guide in understanding communication will be the relationships that you have with other people. The relational perspective is based on the belief that communication and relationships are interconnected. Any type of communication you ever participate in has a relationship assumed underneath it.

The relationship shared by people will influence what is communicated, how it is shared, and the meanings that develop. People generally talk with friends in a different way than with their parents. Coworkers generally talk with one another in a different way than with their supervisors. The meanings of communication also change depending on the relationships. For instance, saying "I love you" will take on a different meaning if said to a romantic partner, a friend, a family member, a supervisor, or someone you just met. In turn, communication creates, reinforces, and modifies all relationships. Saying "I love you" can do many things. It can lead to the creation of a new relationship, strengthen a relationship, maintain a relationship, or result in the realization that people do not view a relationship in the same way. Ultimately, the link between relationships and communication is undeniable, and it can be used to study all communicative activity.

We sincerely believe that your life as a student, friend, romantic partner, colleague, and family member can be improved through the study of communication. Whatever your purpose in reading this book, and whatever your ultimate goal in life, we hope that it will enrich your life by sharpening your abilities to observe and understand communication activities going on around you.

What Is Communication?

In introductory chapters such as this one, you might expect the primary subject to be defined. In this case, you might be looking for an authoritative definition of *communication* that may very well show up on an examination you will take in the near future. Well, here is one you might like: *Communication* is the transactional use of symbols, influenced, guided, and understood in the context of relationships. Actually, that definition is not half bad, but it does not really do justice to what communication really entails.

A number of definitions of communication are out there, and many of those definitions are very acceptable. More than four decades ago, a list of 126 definitions of *communication* appearing in communication scholarship was compiled (Dance & Larson, 1976). Imagine the number of definitions that must have emerged since then! Of course, education should go beyond memorizing a definition and rather should explore deeper issues or characteristics of an issue or a topic, so that is exactly what will be done in this chapter.

One fact that makes the study of communication unique, compared with, say, chemistry, is that you have been communicating your entire life. Previous experience with this topic can be beneficial, because you will be able to draw from relationships and events in

your own life when studying the material. You will even be able to apply the material—and, we hope, improve your communication abilities and life in general along the way.

The drawback to previous experience is that people may not see the value in studying something that is such a common part of life. You may even be asking the “big deal” questions: What is so problematic about communication? Why bother to explain it? Don’t people know what it is about and how it works? Communication is just about sending messages, right?

True: Most of the time, people communicate without thinking, and it is not usually awkward. However, if communicating is so easy, why do people have misunderstandings, conflicts, arguments, disputes, and disagreements? Why do people get embarrassed because they have said something thoughtless? Why, then, are allegations of sexual harassment sometimes denied vigorously, and how can there ever be doubt whether one person intentionally touched another person inappropriately? Why are some family members such a problem, and what is it about their communication that makes them difficult? Why is communication via e-mail or text message so easy to misunderstand? None of these problems would occur if people who asked the previous “big deal” questions were right.



Is communication simply the exchange of messages?
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When first coming to the study of communication, many people assume that communication simply involves the sending of messages from person to person through the spoken word, text messages, Twitter updates, or Instagram posts. That basic view has some truth to it, but communication involves a lot more than merely transmitting information from Person A to Person B.

As you read this chapter, you will likely start to recognize that communication is more complex than it initially appears. Let’s begin by examining a common situation, a restaurant server speaking to customers:

“Hi! My name is Flo, and I’ll be your server today. Our special is a bowl of soup for \$3.95. If you have any questions about the menu, let me know.”

What you may already suppose about communication before studying it formally may be somewhat obvious in this example. Words are being used to convey information from one person to another person. Upon closer inspection, however, much more activity is taking place in this basic exchange.

The message is made up of words or symbols, which are used to allow one idea or representation to stand for something else. Taken-for-granted cultural assumptions are being made when these symbols are selected. “Menu” rather than “a list of all the food that we prepare, cook, and serve in this restaurant for you to choose for your meal” is said because it is assumed the customer will know the code word *menu* and its meaning in a restaurant rather than its meaning on a computer screen. If you are a member of a culture in which this sort of interaction is common, it all likely makes sense.

The server’s message may also make sense because you know how to “perform/communicate restaurant.” The comments are appropriate only in some places and at some times. If Flo were standing in the middle of a park screaming those words at everyone who passed by, you would likely think she was mentally unstable. They also make sense only at the beginning of the interaction, not during the meal or when the customer is leaving the restaurant.

Notice also how the message makes the interaction work in a particular way, setting up one person (server) in a particular kind of relationship with the other person (customer) while setting that relationship up as friendly and casual (“Hi,” not “A thousand welcomes, great ones. Command me as you will, and I shall obey”).

You have built-in expectations about the relationship between a server and a customer. You already know and take for granted that these relational differences exist in restaurants and that restaurants have “servers” who generally carry out instructions of “customers.” Therefore, you expect the customer will be greeted, treated with some respect by the server, told what “the special” is, and asked to make choices. You know the customer will eventually pay for the food and that the server is there not only to bring food, water, the check, and change but also to help resolve any difficulties understanding the menu. Flo will answer any questions about the way the food is prepared or help if you need to find the restrooms. Both the customer and the server take this for granted; it is a cultural as well as relational element of communication.

This relatively brief encounter also demonstrates that communication is more than just the exchange of messages. It may appear as though a simple message involving the greeting, the speaker’s name and job, her relationship to you, and the nature of the special on the menu is being sent to the customer. Beyond the transmission of a simple message, however, something will take place as a result of the message exchange. Further, worlds of meaning are being created, and personal perspectives are being displayed. Additional issues such as gender, status, power, and politeness are being negotiated. All of these things and much more are taking place within this simple exchange.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will introduce and begin our initial discussion of seven key characteristics of communication: (1) Communication is symbolic, (2) communication

requires meaning, (3) communication is cultural, (4) communication is relational, (5) communication involves frames, (6) communication is both presentational and representational, and (7) communication is a transaction. Examining these characteristics will provide a better understanding of what communication and its study really involve.

Communication Is Symbolic

All communication is characterized by the use of symbols. A **symbol** is an arbitrary representation of something else. This may be an object, an idea, a place, a person, or a relationship—to name only a few. As we discuss in the upcoming chapters, symbols are either verbal or nonverbal. Verbal communication involves language, whereas nonverbal communication involves all other symbols. Accordingly, a symbol can be a word, a movement, a sound, a picture, a logo, a gesture, a mark, or anything else that represents something other than itself.

To fully understand symbols, we can begin by discussing what they are not. Although the terms *symbol* and *sign* are sometimes used interchangeably, they do not represent the same thing.

Signs are consequences or indicators of something specific, which human beings cannot change by their arbitrary actions or labels.

For example, wet streets may be a sign that it has rained; smoke is a sign of fire. There is a direct causal connection between smoke and fire and between wet streets and rain.

Symbols, however, have no direct connection with that which they represent. They have been arbitrarily selected. For instance, the word *chair* has been arbitrarily chosen to represent the objects on which we sit, and other languages present the same item in different symbolic ways (e.g., *cathedra*, *sella*, *chaise*, *stoel*, and *zetel*). We call a chair a *chair* simply because the symbol made up of the letters *c*, *h*, *a*, *i*, and *r* has been chosen to represent that object. There is nothing inherent within that object that connects it to the symbol *chair*.

symbols: arbitrary representations of ideas, objects, people, relationships, cultures, genders, races, and so forth

sign: a consequence or an indicator of something specific, which cannot be changed by arbitrary actions or labels (e.g., “wet streets are a sign of rain”)



As close to a moose placed on a pole as we are going to get, this particular traffic sign is actually warning motorists of a moose crossing rather than instructing them to stop. Are traffic signs really signs, or are they symbols?

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DIVERSE VOICES

THE CASE OF THE MISSING TOILET AND SOMETHING TO DRINK



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Because symbols are arbitrary representations of something else, they can be different in different cultures. When Steve's mother first came to the

United States from England, for example, she could find directions not to "toilets" but only to "restrooms," and she did not want a rest. Eventually, she had to ask someone. The euphemism *restroom* is not immediately obvious to cultural outsiders as a reference to toilet facilities. In other cultures—for example, in England—they may be referred to as "conveniences" or by a sign saying "WC" (meaning water closet).

Cultural challenges associated with the use of symbols are not just confined to different countries. Within the United States, the words *pop*, *soda*, *cola*, and *soft drink* are all used to represent the same thing. Those might not be problematic, but some people in the United States use the brand name *Coke* to refer to all carbonated beverages. That could lead to difficulties—for instance, if Flo the waitress asks people unfamiliar with that usage what kind of coke they want when they really want a Mountain Dew. Regardless, if you drink too much, it is a good idea to know where the nearest *convenience* is located.

Questions to Consider

1. What cultural differences in terms have you personally experienced?
2. If challenges occurred, how did you overcome them?

Nothing about the symbol *chair* connects it to that object. Once again, a symbol is an arbitrary representation.

It is sometimes difficult to recognize that symbols are simply arbitrary representations. It sometimes might seem as though there is a natural connection rather than an arbitrary connection. A stop sign—or more appropriately stop *symbol*—is one example of how people tend to see symbols as naturally linked to what they represent. It may seem natural that a red octagon with the capital letters *S*, *T*, *O*, and *P* written in the middle would compel people to cease forward movement when driving an automobile. However, there is no direct connection between that symbol and that particular behavior. A giant moose placed on a pole could arbitrarily represent that same course of action just as naturally as the symbol people call a *stop sign* arbitrarily represents that action. There is no direct causal connection between a symbol and what it represents.

Communication Requires Meaning

Communication requires that symbols convey **meaning**, what a symbol represents. Seems simple enough. However, meanings assigned to symbols change based on multiple contexts, other symbols being used (both verbal and nonverbal), and even the way that symbols are being sent. Something else to consider: People did not just wake up one day and decide *chair* was suddenly going to represent that object you sit on. Rather, meaning associated with that symbol developed over time as people used the symbol when communicating with one another. And, the development of meaning does not suddenly stop. Instead, it continues as long as a symbol continues to be used.

We will examine these ideas within this section. And, we will begin with the social construction of meaning—giving you a better idea of how *chair* did come to represent that object you sit on.

meaning: what a symbol represents

social construction: the way in which symbols take on meaning in a social context or society as they are used over time

Social Construction of Meaning

Social construction involves the way in which symbols take on meaning in a social context or society as they are used over time. Words and phrases used every day within the society to which you belong did not originate with previously established meanings. Rather, the taken-for-granted meanings attached to these symbols have developed through repeated and adapted use over time.

Meaning has to develop somehow, and it happens when groups of people use particular symbols. To demonstrate this idea, we can use a bent paper clip as an example. To our knowledge, there is no word or symbol for a bent paper clip, so we will just randomly use the made-up word *abdak*—which seems as good a word as any. One day, your instructor decides that there is a need to use a word to convey bent paper clip and selects *abdak* to do so. (Stay with us; we are going somewhere with this example!) So, from now on, in that particular class, students refer to bent paper clips as *abdaks*. In another course, you see a bent paper clip and refer to it as an *abdak*. You might have to explain to your classmates in that course what you mean, or they might just figure it is a word they had never come across and take for granted you know what you are talking about. Then, other people use it, again and again, all over campus. The term *abdak* soon becomes a word used and understood on your campus, and using and understanding that word might even indicate being a member of the campus community.

Yet, *abdak* does not stop there. Members of your campus community use the term when interacting with people from other schools. Next thing you know, *abdak* is a term used in academic settings. Then, when used by academics with their nonacademic friends, family, and acquaintances, it becomes a term generally recognized by most people. Eventually, the symbol made up of the letters *a, b, d, a,* and *k* becomes recognized and understood just as the symbol made up of the letters *c, h, a, i,* and *r* is recognized and understood.

COMMUNICATION AND CAREER

LEARNING THE LINGO



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The social construction of meaning is often discussed more broadly in terms of large societal groups. However, the same thing happens

within smaller groups. For instance, your group of friends or family members might use certain words or phrases that have particular shared meanings just for that group.

The same thing occurs in workplaces. It might involve symbols used and recognized within a broad industry. It might also involve symbols used and recognized within a single business or even a small group of employees within that business.

Especially when beginning a new job, it is important to pick up on the unique meanings associated with certain words and phrases as soon as possible. Using them correctly not only enables you to accomplish your work more easily but also enables you to establish membership into that group.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some examples of symbols with meanings unique to places you have worked?
2. Why do you think knowing the unique meanings associated with such symbols is so important to establishing membership or connecting with a group?

The meanings associated with and assigned to any symbol have been socially constructed. In other words, through the social and relational use of symbols, meanings become associated and assigned. Something else to consider is that this process happens continuously. So, over time, original meanings can be lost, and new meanings can vary wildly. Someday, you might call someone an *abdak*, and that person will be offended!

Meaning and Context

A single symbol or message can also have multiple meanings when used in different contexts. For example, the *physical context*, or the actual location in which a symbol is used, will affect its meaning. If you said “There is a fire” while in a campground, it would mean something entirely different than if you said those exact same words while in a crowded movie theater.

The same symbols will also differ in meaning according to the *relational context*, or the relationship shared by the people interacting. Look again at the earlier example of saying “I love you.” It means something vastly different said to you by your mother, your brother, your friend, your priest, your instructor, someone you have been dating for more than a year, or someone you have just met on a blind date.

The *situational context* will also affect the meaning of a symbol. Consider the phrase “I love you” said by the same person (e.g., your mother) on your birthday, after a fight with her, on her deathbed, at Thanksgiving, or at the end of a phone call.



What type of communication context involves physical locations?
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COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

INTERNET ACTIVISM



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In the not-so-distant past, social activism required face-to-face marches and protests, printed pamphlets, and phone calls to convey a message.

Now, these methods of communicating are being supplemented with or replaced by internet activism. There are many different forms of internet activism, ranging from hacking into secure computer systems to including a hashtagged motto at the end of a post. Some people claim that such activism is not as meaningful or effective when compared with other forms of activism. Other people claim

that such activism is just as meaningful as and even more effective than other forms of activism.

Regardless of one’s perspective, different media systems might result in different meanings assigned to the same message. Consider the same motto chanted during a march, written on a billboard, printed on a pamphlet, stated during a phone call, or appearing as a hashtag at the end of an internet post.

Questions to Consider

1. What impact do you think these media systems would have on the meaning assigned to the same message?
2. Do you think one medium is more influential than others at bringing about social change?

Verbal and Nonverbal Influence on Meaning

Accompanying verbal and nonverbal symbols will also affect meaning. For instance, the same words send different messages depending on how they are delivered. Using “I love you” as an example once again, consider those words said by a romantic partner in a short, sharp way; in a long, lingering way; with a frown; with a smile; or with a hesitant and questioning tone of voice. We discuss the interaction between verbal and nonverbal communication in greater detail later in the book. For now, however, just recognize how determining meaning is more complex than it may originally seem.

Meaning and the Medium

medium: means through which a message is conveyed

The **medium**, or the means through which a message is conveyed, will also affect the meaning of a message. A medium might include sound waves or sight—especially when interacting face-to-face with someone. It can also include smartphones, text messages, e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, social networking sites, a note placed on someone’s windshield, smoke signals, or many other methods of communication.

The topic is especially important in cases involving a medium. For instance, breaking up with a romantic partner can be accomplished using any of the means listed, but some may be deemed more appropriate than others. Breaking up with someone face-to-face may be considered more appropriate than sending him or her a text message. Beyond the message of wanting to break up, additional messages, including how you view the romantic partner, the relationship itself, and yourself, are conveyed based on the medium used.

Communication Is Cultural

Another characteristic of communication is that it is cultural. Different cultures make different assumptions and take different knowledge for granted. Each time you talk to someone, from your culture or another, you are taking knowledge for granted, doing what your culture expects, and treating people in ways the culture acknowledges. You are doing, performing, and enacting your culture through communication.

Ultimately, culture influences communication, and communication creates and reinforces these cultural influences. Consider what took place during your most recent face-to-face conversation with someone. Did you greet this person with a kiss or a handshake? Was there

ETHICAL ISSUES

FAKING IT

In general, communicating in a manner consistent with another person’s cultural expectations will result in increased liking by that person and being able to influence that person should that be a goal of the interaction. Accordingly, in such situations, people are often taught and encouraged to adjust how they normally communicate to match the expectations of the other person. However, is communicating in a manner consistent with someone else’s cultural expectations but inconsistent with your normal communication style unethical? In other words, are you being a fake?

Questions to Consider

1. Are there situations where “faking it” might be ethical and other situations where it might be unethical? If it depends on the situation, when would it be ethical, and when would it be unethical?
2. If you have ever been in such a situation, what decision did you make, and why?

additional touch or no touch at all? How far were you standing from one another? Did you maintain eye contact? What were you wearing? Did you take turns talking, or did you talk at the same time? How did you refer to one another? What did you talk about? Did the physical setting affect what was discussed? How was the conversation brought to a close? What happened at the end? Your answers to these questions are based partly on cultural expectations.

When you follow these cultural expectations, you are also reinforcing them. Their position as the “proper” way to do things has been strengthened. Cultural expectations are also reinforced when someone violates them. Consider the most recent experience when you or someone else did something embarrassing. It was probably embarrassing because cultural expectations had been violated. Or, if there was no touch in your most recent face-to-face conversation, what would have happened if you had touched the other person? If touching would have been inappropriate, then the other person may have responded in a negative manner—enforcing cultural expectations.

Communication Is Relational

As mentioned previously, communication and relationships are intertwined. Communication affects relationships, and relationships affect communication. The ways in which communication and relationships are connected are fully explored throughout the book. For now, it is important to recognize that relationships are assumed each time you communicate with someone.

Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson (1967) originally put it a little differently, suggesting that whenever you communicate with someone, you relate to him or her at the same time. All communication contains both a content (message) level and a relational level, which means that, as well as conveying information, every message indicates how the sender of a message and the receiver of that message are socially and personally related.

Sometimes the relational connection between sender and receiver is obvious, such as when formal relational terms (e.g., *dad*) or terms unique to a relationship (e.g., *sweetie* or *stinky*) are included.

Quite often, the relational connection between sender and receiver is less obvious. However, relational cues within communication enable you to determine, for instance, who is the boss and who is the employee. Yelling “Come into my office! Now!” indicates a status difference just through the *style* of the communication. Because the relationships between people often are not openly expressed but subtly indicated or taken for granted in most communication, the content and relational components of messages are not always easy to separate.

Exploring the relational characteristic of communication a bit further, it can be maintained that relationships create worlds of meaning for people through communication, and communication produces the same result for people through relationships. Group decision making, for example, is accomplished not just by the logic of arguments, agenda setting, and solution evaluations but also by group members’ relationships with one another outside the group setting. Groups that meet to make decisions almost never come from nowhere, communicate, make a decision, and then go home. The members know one another, talk informally outside the group setting, and have personal likes and dislikes for one another that will affect their discussions about certain matters. Many decisions that appear to be made during an open discussion are actually sometimes tied up before the communication begins. Words have been whispered into ears, promises made, factions formed, and relationships displayed well in advance of any discussion.

Consider examples from your life. Is everyone equal in your family? How are your interactions with friends different from your interactions with enemies? Have you ever felt a connection to a character in a movie? On your last job interview, did the employer treat you like a potential valued colleague or an interchangeable worker? Are you more

likely to contact some people through text messages and less likely to contact other people through text messages? We examine these questions and more throughout the remainder of the book.

Communication Involves Frames

frame: a basic form of knowledge that provides a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue

communication frame: a boundary around a conversation that pulls one's attention toward certain things and away from others

Communication is very complex, but the use of frames helps people make sense of things. **Frames** are basic forms of knowledge that provide a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue (Wood & Duck, 2006). Think of the frame on a picture and how it pulls your attention into some elements (the picture) and excludes all the rest (the wall, the gallery, the furniture). In similar fashion, a **communication frame** draws a boundary around the conversation and pulls our attention toward certain things and away from others.

Coordinating Interactions

Frames help people understand their roles in a conversation and what is expected of them. Your understanding of the classroom frame will inform you of what you should do as a student and how you should interact with your instructor and with your classmates. A shared understanding of these frames is what enables people to make sense of what is taking place to coordinate their symbolic activities.

Assigning Meanings

People also use framing assumptions to make decisions about what symbols are used and how these symbols should be interpreted. Your relationships with others, for instance, influence how you assign meaning to your words. If someone says something insulting to you, and that person is a friend, you use that relational frame to recognize those words as being intended as a joke. If that person is an enemy, you use that particular relational frame to recognize those words as being intended as offensive.



Many conversations between close friends are “framed” by previous experiences and conversations—hence, the phrase *frame of reference*. In what ways can you deduce that these men are friends and that they therefore share some history together that frames their interaction? Thomas Barwick/Digital Vision/Getty Images

Perspectives

Communication frames are based partly on a person's perspectives of situations and relationships with others. These frames of perspective will greatly influence the coordinating of interactions and the assigning of meaning discussed earlier. They also explain why people do not always agree on what exactly is taking place.

Consider how instructors and students do not always frame situations and their relationships in the same way. For instance, when a student asks an instructor for an extension on an assignment, a number of factors influence how both approach that interaction. A student may be considering personal demands at home, at work, and in other classes as valid reasons an extension should be granted. An instructor may be considering fairness to other students, maintaining accountability, and personal schedule constraints as reasons an extension should not be granted. A student may perceive the instructor as unwilling to provide an extension simply because he or she is mean or on a power trip. An instructor may perceive a student as simply being uncaring and lazy, which explains why the assignment could not be completed on time. A student may see himself or herself as a consumer paying for an education and expect instructors to satisfy his or her every whim. (Do not get us started on this one!) An

DISCIPLINARY DEBATE

WHICH FRAME IS THE CORRECT FRAME?

Multiple frames can be used when assigning meaning to communication. Some of those frames are competing or in direct opposition, as discussed within the text. It is possible that a correct frame exists. However, it is also possible that no single frame can be considered correct or more appropriate than other frames.

Questions to Consider

1. Describe situations in which competing frames were in play. If one eventually dominated, why was that the case?
2. Are there situations when people can agree on a single frame? If so, how might that be determined?

instructor may view students more like clients—sometimes a person must tell clients things they do not want to hear. These are just a few examples of perspectives being used to frame an interaction. They certainly do not represent all perspectives, and some perspectives may be the total opposite of those presented here. Still, it gives you some idea about how a person's perspectives will influence communication frames being used during an interaction.

Communication Is Both Presentational and Representational

Another characteristic of communication is that it is both representational and presentational. Accordingly, although communication normally describes facts or conveys information (**representation**), it also presents your particular version of the facts or events (**presentation**). Communication is never neutral. It always conveys the perspective or worldview of the person sending a message. Your communication with other people *presents* them with a way of looking at the world that is based on how you prefer them to see it.

At first glance, the notion of communication being both presentational and representational is difficult to grasp. Consider the following way of looking at this issue: When you speak to someone, you have a number of words—your entire vocabulary—that can be used to construct your message. You will choose some words to construct the message and not choose other words. You will arrange those words chosen in certain ways and not in other ways. Your selection of words and the arrangement of those words are meaningful acts. For instance, two different perspectives concerning people in the United States unlawfully are presented through using either the term *undocumented worker* or the term *illegal alien*. Your use of words and your construction of messages do not just represent ideas and information; your use of words presents your view of the world to others.

On some occasions, the presentation of these views is carefully developed. For example, imagine or recall a situation in which a friend has questioned something you have done, but you believed your actions were justified and wanted to explain this justification to your friend. In such cases, you would likely select your words very carefully and thoughtfully, wanting your friend to view the situation from your perspective. Your message is conveying information (representational) while providing a glimpse into your perspective and how you want your friend to view the situation (presentational).

On other occasions, the selection of words may not be carefully planned but nevertheless presents your perspective to others. Each time someone communicates, a worldview

representation: describes facts or conveys information (contrast with *presentation*)

presentation: one person's particular version of, or "take" on, the facts or events (contrast with *representation*)



Would sending a text message be considered an act, an interaction, or a transaction?
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communication as action: the act of sending messages—whether or not they are received

is being shared through the selection of terms, regardless of how much thought has gone into the construction of a message. Someone saying “I suppose I should probably go to work now” in a gloomy manner provides a glimpse into how that person views his or her job—presumably not favorably. Someone saying “I get to go to my communication class now” in an understandably excited manner provides a glimpse into how that person views the course—presumably very favorably.

Communication Is a Transaction

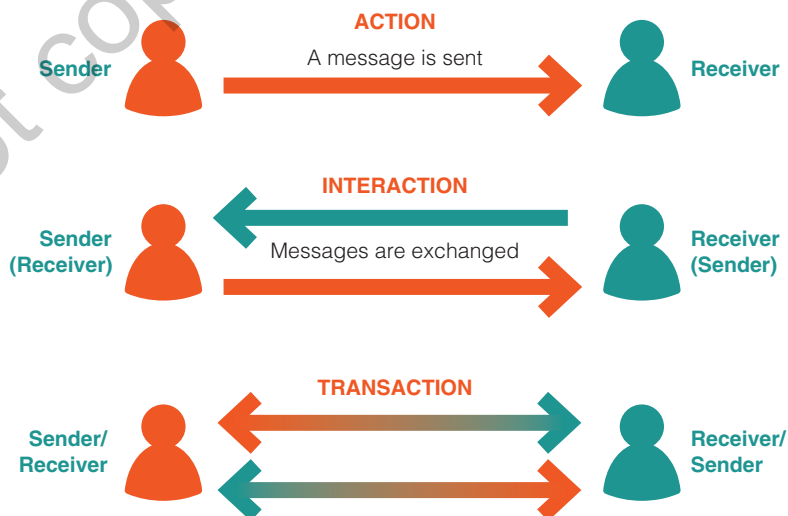
The transactional nature of communication is the final characteristic we will address in this chapter. When addressing communication as a transaction, though, we first must address two other common ways of thinking about communication: communication as action and communication as interaction. As seen in Figure 1.1, each way of thinking about communication assumes something different about how communication works, with communication as transaction being the more sophisticated and more fruitful way of thinking about communication.

Communication as Action

Communication as action is simply the act of a sender sending a message to a receiver. Communication as *action* occurs when someone leaves a message on your voice mail, sends you an e-mail, or puts a message in a bottle in the ocean—that is, when someone transmits a message. So if Emalyn sends a text message to Corban,

communication has occurred. It is pretty simple, really. However, if action were all there was to communication, we would be studying something else and not

FIGURE 1.1 • Communication as Action, Interaction, and Transaction



Messages are exchanged, possibly simultaneously, resulting in the development of meaning and the creation of something new

writing books about it. Communication as action could be developed slightly by questioning whether someone must *receive* a message for it to be communication. What if Corban does not check his text messages? Has communication truly occurred? That is about as far as we can take things, though. If communication were only an action, then there would really be no need to study it.

Communication as Interaction

Communication as interaction counts something as communication only if there is an exchange of information. In this much more typical perception of communication, someone sends a message that is received by someone who in turn sends a message back to the original sender. Using the previous example, communication takes place if Emalyn sends Corban a text, Corban receives the text from Emalyn, and Corban then sends a reply to Emalyn. Although this view of communication is slightly more advanced than communication as action, it remains limited in its scope and fails to capture what truly happens when people communicate.

communication as interaction:
an exchange of information between two (or more) individuals

Communication as Transaction

A more accurate and interesting way to see communication is **communication as transaction**, or the construction of shared meanings or understandings. For example, communication exists between Emalyn and Corban if, through their texts, they both arrive at the shared realization that they understand/know/love/need each other. In other words, communication in this sense is more than the mere exchange of symbols. The speakers get more out of it, and extra meanings are communicated above and beyond the content of the messages exchanged.

communication as transaction:
the construction of shared meanings or understandings between two (or more) individuals

Communication is interesting and worthy of study not because it merely involves the exchange of messages but because something magical and extra happens in this process. Two people speak, and trust is built (transacted); two people touch one another, and love is realized (transacted); two people argue, and power is exerted (transacted); a man holds the door open for a woman, and either sexist stereotyping or politeness is transacted. In all cases, the communication message transacts or constitutes something above and beyond the symbols being exchanged.

If that is not enough reason to study communication, there is even more to consider. Communication does not just create meaning; it creates the stuff of life. This **constitutive approach to communication** maintains that communication creates or brings into existence something that has not been there before. From this point of view, communication does not just construct meanings. Through communication, relationships are created, cultures are created, genders are created, ethnicities are created, sexualities are created, and even realities are created. These are created through communication and maintained, negotiated, challenged, and altered through communication.

constitutive approach to communication:
communication can create or bring into existence something that has not been there before, such as an agreement, a contract, or an identity

For instance, relationships are not locations that we suddenly jump into—even though people refer to being *in* a relationship. Instead, relationships are quite literally talked into existence. Through communication—especially words, but also nonverbal communication—relationships are brought into being, and through communication the maintenance, negotiation, challenges, and alterations of relationships occur.

So, returning to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter, there does not appear to be any part of life that does not involve communication. Communication serves as the actual foundation for most of our life experiences. This fascinating area of study provides a great deal of enjoyment and comes with continuous transformation and paths to explore. Those are some of the reasons we study communication. We are glad that you are joining us.

Learning Outcomes Revisited

1. Explain how communication is symbolic.

Symbols are arbitrarily selected representations of something with no direct connection to that which they represent. Though sometimes used interchangeably, the terms *symbol* and *sign* do not describe the same thing. Signs are consequences or indicators of something specific, which human beings cannot change by their arbitrary actions or labels.

2. Explain how meaning is established.

Because they are completely arbitrary, symbols have the potential for multiple meanings that are subject to change. The meaning assigned to a symbol has been socially constructed and is contingent on the contexts (physical, relational, situational) in which the symbol is used and other symbolic activity (verbal and nonverbal), as well as on the medium used to transmit it.

3. Explain how communication is cultural.

Culture influences communication, and communication creates and reinforces these cultural influences. Each time someone communicates, he or she is taking knowledge for granted, doing what his or her culture expects, and treating people in ways the culture acknowledges. Culture is accomplished, performed, and enacted through communication.

4. Explain how communication is relational.

All communication contains both a content (message) level and a relational level, which means that, as well as conveying information, every message indicates how the sender of a message and the receiver of that message are socially and personally related. Communication and relationships are intertwined. Communication affects relationships, and relationships affect communication.

5. Explain the use of communication frames.

Communication frames are basic forms of knowledge that provide a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue. A communication frame draws a boundary around the conversation and pulls our attention toward certain things and away from others. Frames help people understand their role in a conversation and what is expected of them. People also use framing assumptions to make decisions about what symbols are used and how these symbols should be interpreted.

6. Explain what it means to view communication as both representational and presentational.

Communication describes facts or conveys information (representation) while conveying the perspective or worldview or slant of the person sending a message (presentation). Communication gives other people and audiences a way of looking at the world that is based on how the source of a message prefers them to see it.

7. Explain what it means to view communication as a transaction.

Viewing communication as a transaction means understanding that communication is more than just the simple exchange of messages. Rather, communication involves the construction of shared meanings or understandings between two (or more) individuals. Moreover, communication constitutes, or creates, aspects of life such as relationships, culture, gender, and even reality.

Key Concepts

communication as action 14	constitutive approach to communication 15	representation 13
communication as interaction 15	frame 12	sign 6
communication as transaction 15	meaning 7	social construction 8
communication frame 12	medium 10	symbols 6
	presentation 13	

Communication and You

1. Communicating by using words, terms, and knowledge shared by other people can include them in a conversation. At the same time, doing so can exclude individuals who lack that shared understanding. Describe situations when you have encountered these instances. When would you consider each instance to be appropriate, and when would you consider each instance to be inappropriate?
2. Your communication with someone may appeal to certain relational obligations. For instance, friends may be expected to do certain things if they are truly friends—“Come on, be a friend and help me move this weekend.” Describe situations when such appeals have been done, with friends but also romantic partners and family members. Why do you think such appeals work?
3. Frames provide you with additional context and information in any communication interaction. Think back to a recent conversation with someone. What might you and the other person have said to frame the interaction?

Technology Connections

1. Locate examples of internet activism. What do you think is most effective and least effective about the strategies used in the examples located?
2. In Japanese, there are more than 200 ways for one person to address another according to protocols of respect and status differences recognized by the participants. In English and other languages, there may not be that many, but multiple forms of address are still used to show respect and recognize status difference. Is it as important to acknowledge status and show respect when communicating with people on the internet as it is when communicating with them face-to-face?
3. *Communication apprehension* is the technical term used for the fear or anxiety you might experience when faced with communicating in situations that make you uncomfortable. Some people are anxious when answering a question posed in the classroom. Other people are uncomfortable contributing to small group discussions. For most people, delivering a presentation is something that makes them quite anxious. Are you more or less comfortable talking with someone through text or instant messaging as compared with face-to-face or video chat such as FaceTime? Does it matter with whom you are talking or the topic of conversation? What do you think the reasons are for your answers?

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