Chapter 1

In this chapter, we will work together to do the following:

- Identify central concerns of communication study from a critical perspective
- Begin critical interrogation of communication phenomena
- Explore how communication is linked to culture and power
- Distinguish between communication as representation and communication as constitutive
- Define public advocacy and explore how to build a message for an audience

Communication: A Cultural Introduction

Welcome to this introduction to communication studies. Let's be clear from the start: This is our introduction to communication studies, not someone else's. We'd like to discuss this because we'd prefer our first contact with you, our reader, to be as honest and direct as possible. Because this is our introduction to communication studies, it contains the values, theories, and perspectives we deem important for students as they encounter the academic study of communication. Please know that this textbook, like any textbook, is partial, is incomplete, and has an agenda to engage you in what we believe are some of the more important and useful theories and concepts currently shaping the field of communication.

As you will discover in this book, there are many different ways to talk about what counts as communication studies and what is important to that field. Different people would have you understand the history, concepts, and values of communication studies differently. You would be wise to remember that we are framing these issues and ideas from the outset, because we do have an agenda; our experiences—our lives and our research—have led us to this point, to how we will work together to better understand communication and why it matters.

We would like to engage in dialogue with you. We will almost certainly fail in this effort—textbooks being what they are—but we hope to create, in the pages that follow, situations, contexts, and moments for you to engage, explore, and question. We ask that you read these pages vigilantly. You have to hold us accountable, but you have to hold yourself accountable as well. We write from our own commitments, values, and interests; reflecting on *your* commitments, values, and interests not only will help you find where we've missed something important but also will help you determine how what we have to say is meaningful to and for you. In this sense, we hope to foster a dialogue. And, should you wish, you can contact us by e-mailing Deanna at Deanna.Fassett@sjsu.edu. We welcome the chance to make good on our offer to create a dialogic experience.

We hope that as you read this book, you will see it as a different kind of textbook. We have tried to avoid making concepts seem "objective," as though everyone agrees

about what they mean and why they matter. As a field of study, we see communication as anything but neutral—in fact, in any field of study, scholars (researchers and teachers) struggle over what counts as important knowledge. We think it is dangerous to pretend these disagreements don't exist; we share these struggles with you so you can exercise your own judgment in the face of our (and other scholars') agendas, perspectives, and theories. We take our content and language choices seriously in this book because language isn't neutral or transparent (and neither are our choices of what material to include or exclude). Language shapes what we think about or do in the world.

As we will argue here, communication is less about the "whats" (for example, *what* is communication, *what* are its parts, and *what* are the definitions that follow boldface words?) and more about the "hows" (as in, *how* does communication work, *how* does it constrain and also potentially liberate us, and *how* can we communicate across seemingly impossible divides in ways that provide hope?). To this end, we will try to ask questions that open up dialogue rather than shut it down. It is not our intention or our desire to tell you what to think about the world. But we would like to note here that, like you, we have the right to stand by our convictions—as long as those convictions don't erase the possibility for yours. Further, we promise to represent "facts" about communication—how it works and to what ends we can or do use it—as in progress, emergent, and built through consensus and communication with others. We do so because we hold a particular perspective on communication, one that derives from critical or social justice–oriented approaches to theory. To this end, we will own and admit where terms and ideas come from, providing the theoretical and historical background for these concepts as best we can. We will also, in generating the basis for our dialogue, be as honest about our limitations as we can. This is our responsibility.

> **"Constantly talking isn't necessarily communicating."**
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> —*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

You have a responsibility, too. You will have to agree to participate, to do your part by reading and thinking about the ideas addressed in this book. We bet your teacher would love for you to arrive ready to talk about these important communication issues. Communication teachers often struggle with communication, in an everyday sense, the most. We turn to communication because we hope it provides answers. Often it does. But to uncover the potential of communication as a field, as a space for dialogue and discussion, we need participation. You don't have to agree; you just have to engage. This is, we believe, your responsibility as a reader.

Together, we can work to make this experience one that matters in your life. We know that many books, courses, and professors say this. We hope to prove it. This is our collective responsibility. We are ready to do our part. In the rest of this chapter, we build on this glimpse into who we are and what we value to share and develop a vocabulary and perspective that should guide you through the book. First, we offer and define key terms that should help you as you read: *communication*, *critical perspective*, *culture*, *power*, and *public advocacy*. Second, we examine how communication can help us do the critical work necessary to change our world for the better, introducing the power of communication to constitute, build, and make our world differently. Third, we end the chapter with what will be a recurrent conversation on how the lessons of the chapter can help us effect change in our world through public advocacy. Each of these advocacy sections features ways of communicating with the public. This chapter's public advocacy section addresses the power of communication to produce meaning. Taken as a whole, these sections highlight the key ideas that form the foundation supporting the rest of this book and our dialogue together.

At this point, we feel it is important to call your attention to some of the features of this book—the added elements that, we hope, will help you explore the ideas we share here. While we hope these features help you learn more effectively, we also hope they challenge or call into question in productive ways what and how you are learning. We have added six elements to this book: (1) *guiding goals* at the start of each chapter that identify what we see as likely learning outcomes, helping you anticipate what you can expect to learn as you engage the ideas in that chapter; (2) boldface type indicating *key ideas*, those concepts important to the developing argument of this book; (3) *discussion questions* to stimulate classroom conversation or internal reflection on chapter content; (4) *quotations* from popular (sometimes fictional) and historic figures to highlight what may be provocative or powerful ideas and their implications; (5) a *glossary*, isolating the key terms and definitions we provide in this book and listing them in a central location at the end of the text; and (6) *photographs*, which, in addition to making the book more inviting and interesting to read, help support and challenge not only the book's ideas but also you as readers. These elements help mark this as a textbook, as a tool for your learning.

That we added these elements late in the process, after writing and revising the chapters many times, says something about our discomfort with them. We absolutely hope you'll use this book to learn about communication, culture, and advocacy, but we worry these features will interrupt your dialogue with us. Boldface terms and discussion questions can help readers learn, but they also decontextualize concepts and ideas from the authors who share them and the arguments they make; our use of boldface type risks stripping words of the significance you, as the reader, might bring to our analysis. Please take great care as you read to remember that the presence of these features does not make the book objective or neutral. John and Deanna wrote these words, for better or for worse, and you should not only question the words and compare them against your own experience but should also question all the clever features authors and publishers assume you will need to learn. Are boldface terms helpful to you? Or do they encourage you to skim a chapter for the sorts of definitions that appear on examinations? Do you remember the definitions more fully than you do the connections between the concepts in the chapter? Remember, learning is not a passive process; you must work with the authors of any text to create meaning. What you do with any writing, including and perhaps especially that in textbooks, will inevitably alter your understanding of a given issue or subject, its relevance in your life, and how you share what you've learned. What dialogues will your reading of this text inspire?

The Foundations of Our Dialogue: Terms and Common Understandings

Just like anyone writing to introduce a subject matter or field of study, we have to share and define the concepts needed to do our collective work. Before we begin, we acknowledge here again that our definitions and understandings of communication emerge from our own experiences and values. For us, the best reason to study anything is that we might then be able to see it in a new light, improve it, or change it. In other words, we study communication so we may be able to make different choices. We believe that only through careful study and critical engagement can we hope to understand that when we communicate, we are making choices. For instance, when we

💡 DISCUSSION

What does it mean to engage in dialogue with a book or with the authors of a book? How might you ask critical questions of communication concepts and theories, and what audiences will you ask to join you in this dialogue?

go to the corner store to buy milk, we face a series of communication choices: Do we speak to the cashier? If so, how do we do it? How do we treat the cashier? With grace and generosity? With distrust? With casual familiarity? With an air of superiority? Do we touch the cashier, stand close, provide her or him with cues that we are attentive to this moment, or pass through the transaction as efficiently as possible? While none of the possibilities here are necessarily bad, they are nevertheless choices we have in that moment. Only when we acknowledge that there *are* choices present in any given moment are we able to make an informed choice. Informed choice means that when we act, we do so in a way that not only makes us happy but also enriches our lives and the lives of others. It means we can see the patterns in how we move through the world and, with effort, can change those patterns if we want or need. This is what it means to study communication with attention to the possibilities for change. We call this a critical paradigm or worldview, and it shapes not only our lives but also our understanding of communication and our interactions with you.

To be clear, a critical perspective simply means that we question and challenge what we experience, never taking anything for granted. Some people might think this means being critical, as in negative or harsh. However, in the sense we mean it, being critical is about not only changing what isn't working but also doing so in a hopeful way, in a way that imagines possibilities for growth and renewal. To some extent, this perspective shapes what we think of objectivity. Generally speaking, people don't tend to question findings they view as objective, such as dictionary entries, medical diagnoses, or textbooks. Except, in each of these cases, and others as well, individuals constructed these seemingly objective facts using communication, through debate and agreement (whether amicable or hostile), through active reflection or neglect. Sometimes, whether or not we take something for granted doesn't have a lot of day-to-day significance for us, such as when we agree that gravity is a fact. However, when it comes to human beings, and our understandings of the world, it matters very much whether we take for granted, for example, that people with disabilities are "crippled" or that research reveals it is safe to spray our neighborhoods with DDT or other pesticides. It is fair to say, then, that rather than being invested in objectivity or neutrality or cold, hard facts, we are interested in careful deliberation and consideration and, as a result, in taking the sorts of actions that improve the world and those who live in it. It is also fair to say that people who embrace a critical perspective are keenly aware of the role of power in our lives and are committed to changing oppressive power relationships.

As Bonnie Marranca (1985) so eloquently observes, "To live life fully is to live it as if it were an act of criticism" (p. 11). This book is, in effect, a challenge to look at all the communication phenomena in our world (everything from our self-communication to communication with our relational partners, within our communities or in our col-

In our everyday lives, we have choices about whether to reach out to another or keep to ourselves. What choices do you make and how do you understand their consequences?

lective global context) and ask the hard questions, to appraise what is valuable and meaningful in that communication as well as examine the dark and painful aspects that may lie beneath. What separates critical theory from more traditional theory is the responsibility not just to represent or understand something but to interrogate it. As a result, we would encourage you to encounter the world through critical engagement with it, by reflecting carefully on the communication you witness and asking questions about how it came to be the way it is, whom it benefits, and whom it harms (however inadvertently). These questions drive our interest in communication, and we hope they serve as a productive starting point for your study of communication not only during this semester but also throughout the course of your life.

Perhaps an example might help clarify: In our lives, in and out of the classroom, we often hear well-meaning white people say to us about race: "I don't even see color. Race shouldn't matter." Though common, this sort of statement is also complicated. It represents, at best, someone's effort to live a life where racism (and, apparently, race itself) does not affect personal choices. This communication choice—the decision to say that race is unimportant—is often an effort to build alliances and fight racism. Yet, this statement is not just about someone's *intent*—what she or he means to say—but also about the *effect* such statements have on those who say them, those who hear them, and those who are named in the saying (i.e., people of color). And that this sort of statement has been made before—by others, some with different intentions and agendas—means that, by fitting into a particular communication pattern, these speakers are also accountable for how their current language continues to breathe life into how others have used similar phrasing in the past. This suggests an important insight into communication: If we consider communication from a critical perspective, we are never in complete control of how we make meaning or negotiate power. In other words, our intentions and effects may not match. Nor will others necessarily understand our intentions or effects in the same way we do. This suggests that "communication" is not as simple as talking, public speaking, writing, signing, e-mailing, or texting, though it could include all these. Part of the problem is that all sorts of people toss around the word *communication* without much regard for what it means; a critical perspective on communication calls for a more nuanced definition.

> ### 💡 DISCUSSION
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> What does your life lived as "an act of criticism" look like? What kinds of critical questions might you ask of this book at this point? Where would you challenge our assumptions? What resonates for you so far?

We argue that communication is the collaborative construction and negotiation of meaning between the self and others as it occurs within cultural contexts. First, communication is inherently collaborative. Together, people struggle and work (sometimes reflectively and consciously, sometimes not) to create common understandings, beliefs, and social systems. Second, this collaboration is a negotiation. That is, communication is not just about the speaker but also about those who may come in contact with the speaker's messages (including language, sounds, gestures, and other forms). It is worth remembering that those others may not have the same backgrounds or values, and they may not agree with the message; further, even if we believe our communication is harmless or inoffensive, that same communication may have serious consequences for others. Finally, all communication occurs within a nested, interwoven system of cultures (global, racial/ethnic, economic, sexual, gendered, dis/abled, political, religious, and others). For instance, language or gestures appropriate in one cultural context or setting (e.g., at home, in a hospital, or in a dive bar) might be insulting, provocative, or embarrassing in another. In this way, communication is defined and shaped by its cultural context.

The meaning of gestures can vary considerably from one culture to another.

Our definition points to the ways communication and culture are interdependent. That is, they depend on each other and, as a result, sustain each other. **Culture**, as we use it in this book, refers to a system of shared meanings and assumptions that draw people together within a social context of shared power. For instance, think about your family: Did you grow up with two parents, brothers and/or sisters? Were you an only child? Perhaps your parents divorced, and, as a result, you have family in two or more households. Perhaps you were raised by your grandparents. Perhaps you have another, different story of family. Regardless, the concept of family can help us understand the concept of culture. Most families share a **system of meaning**, a collective set of assumptions, expectations, and understandings (i.e., rules and norms that link the members). This system of meaning includes, for example, shared understandings of significant events (such as a birth or loss of employment), common expectations about who may speak about what and when, and general agreement about the roles different family members perform. There is also a system of power in family groupings, if not as formal in some cultures as in others. This power is distributed across members (though not always equally); it is never located solely in one member of the family. Even in traditional family structures, each person exercises power, despite some members experiencing their roles as completely under the control of another. Power is never a zero-sum game or either/or dichotomy, even in the most extreme circumstances. In prisons or other constraining spaces, all people exercise power, though those actions are seemingly small or fail to result in lasting change. It is also worth noting that we belong to and are shaped by (and therefore help create) more than one culture at a time—and sometimes these cultures are in conflict, making our lives both more rich and more challenging.

One of the challenges of exploring communication from a critical perspective involves the way terms and concepts overlap and are interdependent. For instance, to explain what's important about the relationship between communication and culture, we have to talk about power; to explain what's important about power, we have to address how communication and culture create power. **Power**, we argue, is a productive tension resulting from our different locations within culture. By productive tension, we mean that our heightened awareness of power in our relationships with one another can be instructive—teaching us about ourselves, one another, and communication. We each occupy a variety of **cultural locations**. For instance, John is a white, educated, middle-class male. Certainly, this list could go on to include familial relationships, sexuality, citizenship status, ability, and so on; however, it is important to note that each of these markers situates us *in relation to* others. For instance, given his gender, John is often in a position of privilege culturally. At work, he can be testy, aggressive, decisive, or even cutthroat, and others will take him to be a man, a good worker, and a guy who gets things done. However, Deanna, who is similarly white, educated, and middle class, but female, might encounter a different outcome. Instead of seeing her as a good, productive, or serious worker, others might read her testiness, aggressiveness, decisiveness, or

competitiveness as "bitchy." Even words describing men and women who are sexually aggressive or promiscuous have different connotations, situating men in much more positive terms than their female counterparts. Being male (or female) is relevant as a cultural location because men (or women) are always seen *in relation to* women (or men). In this sense, our cultural positions are always, sometimes subtly, mediated or sustained by power.

Because of the ubiquitous, and often unequal, nature of power in our culture, we take up the question of **public advocacy** in this book. That is, we offer ways we might reflect on and take action against the injustices we encounter. Through public advocacy, we collaborate with others in an open conversation wherein we reflect on our relationships with one another and work toward a common good. In its best moments, public advocacy is a hopeful challenge, a way of engaging oneself and one's community to help strengthen and improve both.

Public advocacy is not new in the United States; it is the very foundation of our democracy. From revolutionary heroes in our country's early history, such as Patrick Henry and Nathan Hale, to more contemporary leaders, such as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (civil rights activist), César Chávez (migrant workers' rights activist), Alice Paul (early suffragist), former President Jimmy Carter (advocate for the homeless), Harvey Milk (gay rights activist), John McCain (advocate for election reform), Sarah Weddington (reproductive rights activist), Bono (advocate for ending world hunger), and former Vice President Al Gore (environmentalist), the role of public advocacy in moving toward greater and greater equity across difference cannot be denied. For instance, Al Gore has, arguably, done more for climate crisis education and awareness of the dangers of greenhouse gases as a public figure than he could have done as president. Free to speak his mind without electoral ramifications, his outspoken positions on global warming and his film *An Inconvenient Truth* changed the global conversation about the role of human activity on our planet, earning him a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. In many ways, Gore stands as a powerful example of how advocacy can raise awareness and prompt new collective action for the betterment of all.

One of the most common complaints about young people is their lack of participation in our democratic process. Repeated in the media and our businesses, educational institutions, and political circles, youth (in the past 30–40 years) have gotten a bad rap for a lack of engagement in the political process. However, there are multiple ways to measure activism and participation. If we look to presidential elections, we see occasions where the youth vote has mattered—for example, Barack Obama's win in the 2008 Iowa caucus and subsequent victory in the presidential races of 2008 and 2012 (Robillard, 2012; Sullivan & Clement, 2013). And there are other ways besides formal electoral politics to understand modern public advocacy: the growing presence of the Internet as a grassroots space for collective action, for instance. In recent years, several online groups have left an impression on the

Former Vice President and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Al Gore discusses the global climate crisis.

> **DISCUSSION**
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> Of what cultures are you a member? Where do you observe power in your cultural interactions? In what cultural settings do you feel empowered or disempowered? How does this affect others who are like you? How does this affect others who are from cultures different from your own?

political landscape. MoveOn.org (on the political left) and the Christian Coalition (on the political right) have both successfully used the Internet to gain traction and create a forum to promote their views. This has grown more mainstream in recent years as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace have become common platforms for political leaders to gain attention for themselves and the issues and causes they promote. Facebook, for instance, hosts thousands of advocacy groups, with ideological points of view ranging from the most conservative to the most progressive. We might reasonably ask whether corporations participate in advocacy (consider, for example, TOMS shoes or the Global Fund's Product Red campaign), whether whistleblowers (such as Enron's former Vice President for Corporate Development Sherron Watkins or, as some believe, former government intelligence officer Edward Snowden) are public advocates, and whether journalists and news organizations should play a role in public advocacy.

DISCUSSION

When you think of advocates, who springs to mind? Who do you know who engages in advocacy? Who has advocated for you? How did that feel? What types of public advocacy have you witnessed? What action(s) did you take?

While forms or means of advocacy have changed, the central premise of assuming a role as an engaged citizen and advocating for the public good remains the same. To stake a claim in relation to an issue, to advocate on behalf of oneself and others, requires careful reflection and critical introspection. How does this issue affect you and those around you? Are you advocating for equality and fairness? Are you dedicated to promoting healthy and affirming positions? What happens if you remain silent on the issue? Who stands to benefit from what you are arguing for, and who stands to lose? Critical inquiry means asking complicated questions and sorting out the implications of your actions (or inactions). Being critical is, in a sense, being responsible (accountable to) and response-able (able to respond) to the present as you envision a future that affects you and those around you.

Words for Change: The Power of Communication

One of the most frustrating experiences we have as communicators is that of feeling stuck, caught up in a flurry of words we can't seem to change or control. Sometimes this happens during political debate: It's limiting to feel as though we can be only pro-choice or pro-life, patriotic or traitorous, Republican or Democrat. In these moments, language can feel like a chokehold, something that precedes us and defines us, making it difficult to articulate just what our relationship to a given idea or issue is. Words can, in this sense, resemble too-small hermit crab shells: confining, rigid, and inadequate for the task. And just like hermit crabs casting off their old shells, we have, as a society, taken up, tried on, and rejected language such as *crippled*, *invalid*, *handicapped*, *idiot savant*, *deaf and dumb*, and *retarded*. This same kind of search for meaning occurs across a broad array of backgrounds, including race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, economic class, faith, political affiliation, and age. That we experience frustration with labels and language suggests that communication is more than just words.

"Things do not change; we change."

—Henry David Thoreau

Here, it may help to return briefly to our definition of communication as the collaborative construction and negotiation of meaning between the self and others as it occurs within cultural contexts. We highlight this to focus primarily on one word in the definition: *construction*. The idea of construction is important to us as people concerned

with communication. Think for a moment about the most basic way we might use *construction*—say, in talking about building a home or website. In both instances, the use of the word points to the act of making, of putting pieces together. Such a word says, "This thing, this home, this website is not complete. You are catching a glimpse of the *process*." For us, this is a useful metaphor for communication because, much like lines of data in a webpage or raw materials in walls or a roof, communication is the process—the action and materials—that builds our social lives.

As a practical extension of this use of *construction*, consider your first day in this introductory communication course: Was there a syllabus? Perhaps you engaged in a discussion of how to communicate in class, including guidelines such as turning off cell phones, leaving open seats near the door for students who arrive late, or how best to contact the professor. Further, the tenor or tone of the class can vary tremendously. Did the teacher seem nice, friendly, helpful? Strict, aloof, or distracted? Is this a class you wanted to take? Are you grouped with a bunch of people who would rather be anywhere else? The first day is actually a powerful example of how communication builds a social environment. The shared time on the first day sets the tone for and begins to build the culture shared among the people in this specific classroom. In this way, communication constructs, or literally makes possible, not only the relationships in the room but also the teacher's ability to teach and the learners' to learn. What does this tell you about the capacity for communication to matter, to make things matter?

In other words, communication is *never* just a conduit, channel, or tool for transferring information. Communication *always* produces, makes, and constructs. What can make this tricky is that the words we use to talk about communication are sometimes misleading. We often talk about "getting our message across" or "thinking about what we want to say." Both of these examples suggest that communication is something that begins with an idea we then wrap up in language and send to another listener. Unfortunately, this makes words seem relatively insignificant—like interchangeable parts easily swapped in or out. If this were true, what would be the harm of trading one term for another as long as they mean the same thing? This might not make a difference if we are using *sad* instead of *melancholy*; however, the distinction comes into sharp focus if the terms in question are *African American* and *negro*. Certainly, the stakes are raised here, and no one can deny the ways the latter term is linked to a racist past that seeks to oppress and marginalize a group of people.

Consider two different ways of seeing communication: communication as representation and communication as constitution. **Communication as representation** means that communication is abstract or separate from our lives and the world around us. This perspective suggests that words represent things, that the words we speak are a translation of our thoughts or a stand-in for objects or ideas in the world; you receive the words and translate or decode them for their meaning. This particular way of understanding communication describes it as something we use, like a tool we might implement to fix a broken radiator. This way of understanding communication is common. For instance, if you have a fight with your romantic partner, you might see yourself as using the tools of communication to convey your concern and desire to mend the relationship. Or if you have to give a sales pitch, you might see yourself as using communication (and learned strategies) to accomplish that task. While such a perspective can be empowering in the moment, the idea that we can control communication—make it precise enough to say exactly what we mean—just isn't an accurate way of understanding what is happening in those moments of interaction. Not only does it fail to explain all the many different, difficult, and prolonged misunderstandings we experience in our personal, professional, and civic relationships with others, but it fails to acknowledge
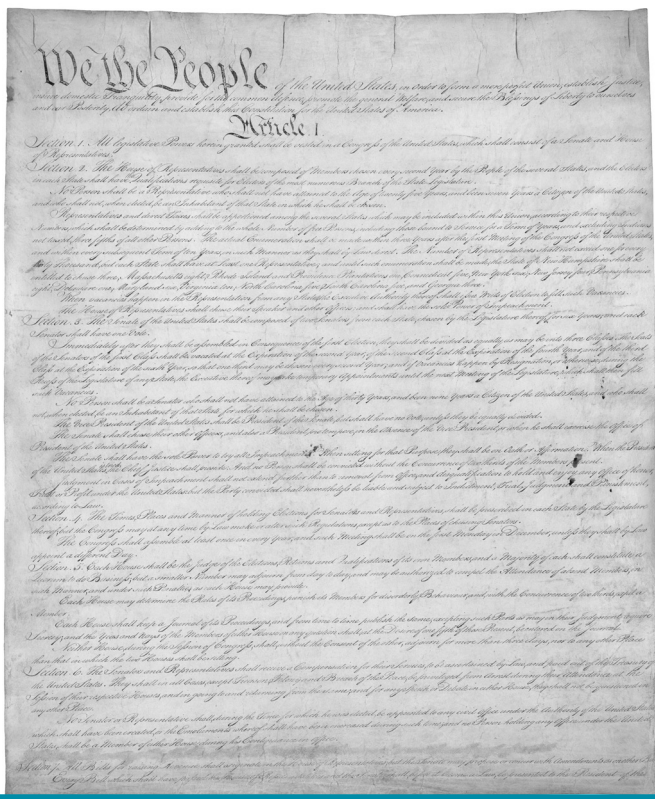
We can better understand communication as constitutive by considering what documents like the U.S. Constitution do for a people--together, these documents constitute a country, literally and figuratively.

the power of language to shape us and our worlds. We don't use communication simply to mend our relationships or sell a product; we have to build those meanings together, through interaction.

A more accurate way of thinking about these issues is to see communication as constitutive. In other words, communication helps create us and what we think of as our realities (such as our social relationships, sense of right and wrong, belief that we can or cannot effect change in the world, and so forth). You might choose to link *constitute*, the root word that forms *constitution*, to that famous document on display in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. This would be a useful connection: That document, with its Bill of Rights, helps constitute or create our government by establishing what we believe and value, as well as how we should behave with one another in this society. People who enjoy ramen noodles or cake made from a box mix will also recognize *constitution*: If we add water to such prepackaged foods, they will become something more than their component parts. The ingredients blend inseparably to create a new substance (ideally, something tastier). So, while thinking of communication as a tool may help us sometimes, communication is more than a tool: It surrounds us, builds us, and makes possible some ways of seeing and not others, some actions and not others. For example, think of the way your family members tell stories about who you are, noting your positive, and maybe your negative, qualities. These stories aren't just stories—they help strengthen and build the relationships within the family, just as they help shape you and your sense of your choices. Maybe your grandmother likes to tell you about how you were always a drama queen; maybe you embrace that image of yourself and act accordingly, or reject it and act accordingly, but you're forever changed by these small, easy-to-overlook instances of communication in your life. Communication produces meaning, relationships, and our selves, and it sustains all aspects of our lives.

As another example, consider what is arguably the most routine, everyday communication: someone saying "hello." Dwight Conquergood (1983), communication scholar, once captured it this way:

> When I arrived . . . a great deal of discourse was generated to meet my special needs as a visiting stranger for the week. . . . Time after time again kind people came up to me and said something like this: "Hello, Dr. Conquergood, welcome." . . . People were not communicating to me that I was welcome as much as they were *making me welcome*. (p. 30)

When someone greets you, how she or he says hello helps build the foundation (or, if the person is unfriendly, damages the foundation) for the relationship you have together. Understanding communication as constitutive means taking seriously that communication *makes* meaning (and doesn't just move it around from person to person or place to place).

How we understand communication isn't about passing a test or learning vocabulary words such as *representation* or *constitution*. Rather, it charges us with a responsibility: If our words create possibilities, if they can effect change in the world, then we have to take them seriously. In this sense, it would be easier to think of communication as a tool—then all we'd need to do is learn how to say the right word at the right time to accomplish our goals. But words aren't interchangeable, and they do matter. Understanding communication as constitutive means exploring how our communication works to create, understand, and challenge power and privilege, oppression and justice.

If we can learn how our privilege functions to enable us at the expense of others, for example, then we can behave otherwise; we can change. For instance, as white authors, we know that our whiteness and the privileges associated with it are deeply rooted in history and communication (McIntosh, 1997). We have role models who look like us, we have language that situates us as powerful and "normal," and, historically, we have had the power to name others in light of these privileges. But even though it can seem otherwise, a person's skin color isn't inevitable or natural but, rather, created through communication. If you look at our skin, for example, you'd figure we're white. But the color of our skin isn't just a matter of genetics; it is a product of generations and generations of mating—of social rules about who could love whom. The public's recent racist backlash in response to a Cheerios cereal commercial featuring a biracial family reminds us that these social rules are still alive and may be hotly, violently, and painfully contested (Goyette, 2013). So even the aspects of who we are that seem the most concrete or natural are built through communication.

When someone greets you, how s/he says hello helps give rise to the relationship you'll share.

We must, therefore, learn to adopt a critical, questioning attitude about the world around us; those aspects of it we might think of as inevitable or natural or permanent may well emerge from communication. And anything we build through communication can also be altered by communication. Our words are powerful, and engaging them critically and publicly with others will make us powerful as well.

Public Advocacy: Process and Responsibilities

Each chapter in this book includes a section we call "Public Advocacy." We have designed these sections to assist you in the creation of public messages. These messages can be found anywhere: in a tweet or Facebook update, a public blog entry posted online, or a speech presented in this class, in your local community, or beyond. We pay careful attention to communication across a variety of contexts—whether in relationships, public forums, or written documents. Each section extends the topics we discuss in the chapter and encourages you to find meaningful ways to use what you read here.

Communication as Process

In this first public advocacy section, we address what the idea of communication as constitutive means for your formation of a message. Here, it is helpful to think of

communication as a process, rather than a product. This can be challenging when even the ways we describe communication are misleading: "a miscommunication" suggests a message gone awry, "I don't get that" suggests that a message is something we can capture and hold on to, and so forth. This is why your communication instructor is likely to fuss if you say "communications" instead of "communication"; the first suggests products, the messages themselves (such as an e-mail or television show), while the second foregrounds the process itself. Why make such a big deal about this distinction? If you think of communication as a product, you tend to focus on the quality of that product and not on the process by which it came to be. Moreover, if you think of communication as a product, whether an essay or speech, you tend to think of communication and learning as separate processes. Rather than assuming that speaking or writing is a way of *showing* you've learned something, considering communication as a process challenges you to remember that communication itself, the speaking or the writing, is a way of *learning* something. As E. M. Forster observed, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Plimpton, 1999).

What does it mean to say that communication is a process? Generally speaking, a process is a series of stages or steps—first one thing and then another. So, for instance, when you take writing classes, you learn there are steps in the writing process, such as invention or brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. You may have had assignments directing you to come up with ideas one day and produce a certain number of rough-draft pages another day.

There are many different models for writing or speaking as a process, but the most basic and common is a **stage model**. For example, a writing process model identifies stages the writer moves through as she or he writes:

Invention ←→ Drafting ←→ Revising ←→ Editing ←→ Publishing

In understanding speech composition, this might look like the following:

Conversation ←→ Performing or drafting aloud ←→ Writing ←→ Practice ←→ Presentation

Different researchers describe these models by slightly different names and/or include different stages in the process to illuminate some of the less-explored aspects of each one, such as the time you spend mulling over a given idea or assignment.

However, it is important to note that, as a creative process, communication is both idiosyncratic and recursive. By **idiosyncratic**, we mean that the process is somewhat distinct or unique for each of us. We may all move from idea generation to shaping and polishing the final version of our work, but how we get there can be as unique as we are. You might first come up with an idea, then draft a little bit, make some changes in the language, and perform a little bit of it aloud for a friend. While talking, you might come up with another idea, add it to the first, take away some, read it aloud again, polish a bit, and then maybe discover another idea. Each of us has our own way of creating with words. (And this says nothing of the sudden compulsion to clean the house or bake brownies in preparation to write your next speech or essay!) This example also illustrates how the process is **recursive**—that is, you bounce back and forth across these different stages instead of moving in a lockstep fashion from

💡 DISCUSSION

What does your communication process look like? How does this look when you are trying to write? How is it different when you are preparing to speak in public? Which strategies or behaviors are helpful to you, and which interfere with your efforts to develop an effective argument?

one to the next. In fact, a rigid or unyielding adherence to following a series of steps in a particular order can often spell trouble for a communicator, as it can stifle the creative process.

For instance, imagine constructing a speech about the funding of higher education. You might be drawn to this topic because of a decrease in state spending and its possible implications for your university or college (including faculty furloughs, fewer courses to choose from, or difficulty in securing financial aid). Such an issue may be significant for you—in fact, you may have had conversations with your professors, roommates, neighbors, friends, and parents on this very topic. From this spark of interest and the knowledge that you are to give a speech for other students who may be affected by this funding issue, you begin your research, gather information, and start to assemble the parts of your speech. You may, in that process, continue your dialogue with friends, and, with your new information, your conversations might change, leading to changes in your speech construction. You may soon be ready to start writing your speech, practicing how you might put these ideas in action. As the date for your speech approaches, you might go back to your conversation partners and continue your research, perfecting your message. Indeed, even as you present your speech, questions from the audience or the teacher might inspire new ideas or ways of thinking about your topic. In this way, even a public speech is a process, a developmental generation of ideas that don't end even on the date of your speech.
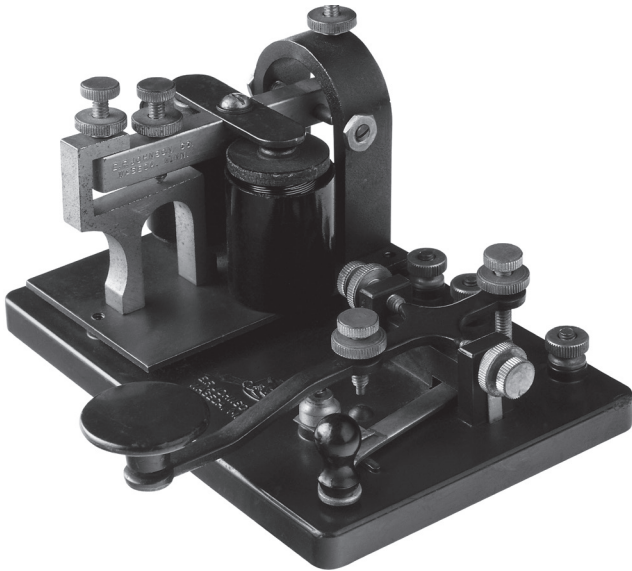
Perhaps the most important lesson we can take from considering communication as a process is that we learn *as* we communicate, not *before* we speak or write. This has implications for our creative process, challenging us to be more compassionate with ourselves and our peers as we try to articulate increasingly complex or provocative ideas. Where our work concerns writing, a process model helps us understand and resist creative blocks; many writers struggle because they attempt to edit throughout the entire process, in effect self-censoring their ideas and stifling their creativity and fluency. While it is important to remember that the writing process isn't a series of linear steps (most writers move back and forth and back again as they write), it is also helpful to remember that editing should be its own distinct phase of the writing process, occurring near the end when the writer is shaping and polishing the final (or nearly final) writing. Where our work considers public speaking, it is important to remember, first, that conversation and oral performance as you compose is key to the creation of a vivid and compelling presentation. Second, we would do well to remember that, though talking with our friends might be a perfect time to sort through our jumbled ideas, we ought to have practiced frequently and fully before speaking in public.

Responsibility as Communicators

A process model also asks us to reconsider our responsibilities as communicators. When we think of communication as a product, we tend to imagine that we might choose just the right words to "encode" our message and "convey" it to our listeners. That perspective puts the burden for effective communication primarily on the speaker, who must do her or his best to create the most precise wording possible for the message; then the listener, or reader, must focus carefully to "decode" or "receive" that message. Such a transmission model of communication misleads us into thinking communication is a transparent and simple process, like dialing someone's phone number.

> "It's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds."
>
> —President Barack Obama

Often our understandings of communication stem from prevailing communication media innovations.

💡 DISCUSSION

If communication is constitutive—if our words create our worlds—then what opportunities and challenges does that pose for you as someone who will communicate, via writing and speaking, in public?

Often, our understandings of communication map onto our most prevailing communication media innovations (Czitrom, 1983). For example, when we first encountered the telegraph, it seemed as though communication was a matter of transmitting messages. During the emergence of the telephone, scholars and individuals more fully recognized the reciprocity of communication in the turn-taking of messages. In recent years, with the development of the Internet, instant messaging, social networking platforms, and other multifaceted forms of communication technology, it seems we are, as a field, better able to recognize the ways communication is simultaneous, complex, and always occurring, whether or not we're aware of it. These more current, more nuanced models help us understand not only that communication is *not* a simple process of sending and receiving messages but that what happens when we communicate is a collaboration, a joint effort between speaker (or writer) and listeners (or readers). In this way, the responsibility for communication does not rest primarily with the speaker or the listener but with both equally.

As you read what follows, bear in mind our shared responsibility to observe and analyze communication in nuanced and contextual ways. In appreciating communication for how it creates, sustains, and damages our relationships with one another and our environment, consider what forms of advocacy feel most meaningful to you. Where and when will you speak out, and how will you invite others into that conversation?

KEY IDEAS

TOWARD PRAXIS

1. *Reflection:* How do you typically think about communication? Do you usually see it as a way of sharing your ideas, or do you think of communication as a way to come up with ideas (or something in between)? Is one way of understanding communication better than another in different contexts (home, school, work, government, etc.)?

2. *Discussion:* What is social justice? How do we know when something is or is not socially just?

3. *Action:* Start to explore the issues salient for you and members of your community. This may mean reading your campus, local, or national newspaper, or it may mean visiting local organizations, groups, and community centers. What needs to change in your community? Who thinks so? Why?

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