



Communication Theory and the Study of Communication

Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Workshop and Panel Reports of the 1956 Conference on College Composition and Communication (Oct., 1956), pp. 133-135

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/355126>

Accessed: 23-04-2020 08:55 UTC

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The participants reached an early agreement that the discussions should not be concerned with evaluating various theories, or with applying theory in practical teaching situations. Rather we sought answers to questions such as these: What are the possible contributions of other disciplines to a satisfactory theory of communication? What areas of study are likely to be rewarding to teachers of the communication skills?

Since our discussions of theory were of necessity "high level," we sought to erect a framework to give point to our deliberations. (This framework was not entirely satisfactory.) In our first meeting we dealt briefly with the need for theory in any discipline. We agreed that theory sets forth tentative premises which provide a working basis; it establishes a necessary set of principles for action; and it must be considered tentative until it has been tested.

These deliberations led us to a second question: Why is a theory of communication needed? We agreed that present theory in communication is scattered among many disciplines: linguistics, semantics, social psychology, cybernetics, acoustics, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, etc. We agreed that much of the theory commonly applied to the problems of teaching communication skills is of doubtful, or untested, value and that our understanding of much of this theory is poor.

We felt that since communication is an inter-disciplinary discipline a suitable theoretical framework is needed to give it form, content, and direction. We felt that this theory cannot be taken whole from other disciplines, but that a new discipline is needed which will borrow from many others.

The first step in the formation of such

a discipline, we agreed, is to determine the dimensions of communication. What is the field on which we need to focus? We agreed that the field is that of the whole symbolic behavior of man, yet we felt that this definition is too broad, since it seems to encompass all of life.

At the suggestion of our chairman, we adopted as a guide for our discussion a modification of the Shannon-Weaver formula. Not that we felt that this is ultimately the proper formula, but that it seemed to give us a logical division of the subject.

1. The nature of the external world: philosophical discussions of reality; for the purposes of a discipline of communication skills the most useful approach is pragmatic—the world is what we do with it.

2. The perception of the external world: the social-psychology of perception; the influence of motivation; cultural influences on perception, including the linguistic structure; and the importance of the value system. It was felt that much is known about perception through the disciplines of psychology, social-psychology, and anthropology.

3. The encoding process: abstraction, classification, the relation of symbol to reality; it was felt that we can describe well some aspects of the process, but that we know little of how the process operates.

4. The process of transmission: it was felt that the mechanics of transmission are well known, but that purely mechanical understanding is not sufficient; there was no suggestion about what was needed in this area.

5. The code: it was felt that our understanding of the code is increasing through the work of modern linguistics, but the findings of linguistic science are

far in advance of our knowledge of how to apply them.

6. The message: data, logic, organization; it is felt that we know much about this area, but that we have failed to use the knowledge we have.

7. The process of receiving.

8. The decoding: the comments were parallel to those about encoding.

9. The response, including the feedback.

Time did not allow for an elaboration of all of these steps. There was general agreement that we have concentrated on some steps to the exclusion of others, that we have not studied the place of value or purpose in the whole communication process (and this is a factor which the purely mechanical formulation of our outline did not provide for), that there are philosophical problems of reality, the relation of man to reality, of logic, etc., that need our attention.

Certain theoretical frames of reference seemed to be important to a development of a theory of communication. These include pragmatism (Dewey, James); functionalism or operationalism (Malinowski, Bridgemen); relativity, in the best sense of the cultural anthropologists (Sapir, Whorf); behaviorism (especially the social behaviorism reflected in G. H. Mead, Bloomfield and the social psychologists; Gestalt, field theory and other theory which stresses the whole; and the theory of signs (Morris).

Throughout the discussion, it was stressed that the mechanical formulation and the behavioral emphasis must not exclude possible primary contributions from the humanities. It was felt that the understanding of communicative behavior is a necessary integration of the mechanistic, the behavioral, and the valuational and that any theory of communication must bridge gaps among these fields. It was felt that pragmatism has important contributions to make to a value theory, in the sense that Aristotle's

Poetics is a pragmatic theory of aesthetics, but that there are elements of experience, observation, and intuition which may go beyond pure pragmatism. Such a theory of values in communication, and indeed the whole theory of communication should not become fixed, but remain dynamic.

It was agreed that such a theory has non-normative and normative aspects, that it should begin as a non-normative description of what occurs, as in the case of modern linguistics, but that we, as the carriers of a cultural and humanistic tradition, are responsible for working for "good" communication.

We agreed that the discussion was too discursive, although necessarily so for a first session. We felt that the workshop should become a permanent feature of the annual meetings and that it is necessary for the CCCC to consider continuously the problems of theory. Realizing that we cannot continue to conduct a highly theoretical discussion, as valuable as we felt one to be, we suggest that next year's workshop on theory should limit itself to one or more related parts of theory and attempt to deal with them in more detail and less abstractly. It was felt that each year a new facet of theory should be explored, in order to encourage thought and research among teachers of skills.

PARTICIPANTS

Chairman: Herbert Hackett, University of Utah, Salt Lake City
Co-Chairman: William Hoth, State University of New York, Cortland
Secretary: Maurice A. Lee, Morgan State College, Baltimore, Maryland
Co-Secretary: Lawrence Levy, Defiance College, Defiance, Ohio
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Mass Media as Subjects for Study

The report of the 1952 workshop on "Newspapers, Periodicals, and Motion Pictures as Material for the Communication Course" concluded that mass-media subjects belong in the freshman program, particularly because of "the rapid emergence of mass media in the past thirty years and the strong impact they make upon the large majority of the population in America."¹ The introductions at the first session of the 1956 workshop indicated that most participants were teaching in a college or high school in which mass media are already given some emphasis. Thus, instead of reopening the question of whether the mass media deserve consideration, workshop members expressed interest in the following questions:

1. What goals, rationale, and content are typical of specific programs that include the mass media?
2. To what extent should teachers try to give students insight into the general nature of mass communication—the dual roles of the media as industries intent on profits and as agencies vested with a public interest; the differences between mass communication and face-to-face communication; the encoding of mass-media messages by producers and the decoding of the messages by receivers; and the kinds of ef-

fects mass communication may have?

3. What approach, what methods, what kinds of assignments will teach students to comprehend and evaluate the news and information content of the media? To detect and evaluate the popular values, images, and stereotypes reflected in and often reinforced by the media?
4. In the study of any one medium or kind of cross-media content, how much emphasis should be put on such interrelated facets as: The cultural setting in which the communication takes place? The pressures which shape the producer's encoding of the message? The selection and treatment of content in the message itself? The pressures or individual characteristics which influence the receiver's decoding and interpretation of the message?
5. How should transitions be made from other kinds of course content, such as literature, usage and semantics, or logic, to mass media?
6. What linguistic and literary concepts and techniques may be either used or illustrated in teaching mass-media subjects?
7. What information, concepts, and techniques from journalism and the social sciences are particularly useful to teachers concerned with mass-media subjects?

¹Confirmation of this view occurs in "Round Table, Mass Culture," *College English*, XVII (January, 1956), 233-238.