Taking a communication perspective on delivering student services: Adding value and visibility to our work

David Paterno, Ph.D., Centre for Teaching and Learning, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand, d.paterno@massey.ac.nz

In this paper, I explore the relevance of taking a communication perspective on delivering services to contemporary university students. As is explored in detail below, taking a communication perspective means seeing the actions and outputs of our work as a conjoint product built in relationships not only with our student clients, but also in and across the varied teams representing the diverse operations of staff working in offices of student services. The thrust of the paper is to identify what a communication perspective is and to sketch out how taking it changes the way we approach our work. In short, the paper articulates a few of the advantages to taking a communication approach while also asking others to consider doing the same. The paper also includes a rationale for paying close attention to the variety of media – including face-to-face conversation – invoked in our relationships with students as an essential means of increasing both the visibility and value of our work. In sum, this short essay presents an overview of and rationale for being mindful about the larger role communication can play in meeting students where they are for the purpose of bringing them where they want to be.

Keywords

Communication, student success, advising

Introduction

Communication is more than those times during which we ‘send’ or ‘receive’ messages (Sigman, 1995). Rather, communication is the overarching, coordinating system of meaningful behaviours we encounter in our day-to-day lives. Approaching communication in this fashion might initially seem counter intuitive and odd. Doing so, however, illustrates the idea that the ‘things’ we encounter in our daily lives are not simply found objects but rather made objects – made in communication. Using the words of Barnett Pearce (2007), this alternative formulation captures the idea that we live in communication. Communication therefore is strongly social and requires coordination with others as ‘make’ a sense of coherence, place, and meaning in our social worlds. Importantly, taking a communication perspective also means being mindful of the forms of media upon which we rely. In a communication perspective, all communication is mediated. Moreover, media matter at least as much as for their form as for their content. This stems from the idea that different media carry with them distinct interactive and social advantages and/or disadvantages. While one might not be enabled to fully reconfigure these features – or as Innis (1951) called them biases – our sense of satisfaction with communication can be elevated when we are mindful of the ‘Faustian bargain’ encountered in our use of media (Postman, 1985).

The goal of my current remarks is to present a contrasting and fresh perspective on communication and to do so in a way which encourages others to be mindful of their own participation in the patterns of communication engaged in the delivery student services. Ultimately, the rationale for approaching communication as described below is to improve students’ sense of belonging and to assist them in obtaining real success as they navigate our universities.

Contrasting views

Below are two very different approaches to the study of communication. The first of these is widely understood and tends to dominate the way we conceive of and ‘act into’ moments of communicating (Pearce, 2007 p. 25). I make use of Pearce’s odd phrasing ‘act into’ as it accurately captures the idea that communication is less a thing we do than it is a process into which we ingress. The second perspective – which remains very much marginal to the academic study of communication – offers distinct advantages to the dominant paradigm of communication. It is this alternative view which I argue holds promise to improve our interface with students and their needs.
Perspective #1 – Communication as transmission

The predominant view of communication is one of information transmission. In this view, information is seen as a thing which exists independent of and apart from moments of interacting. This is an extraordinarily pervasive view of communication and is found across a wide variety of narratives of what communication is, how it works, and why it matters. In effect, communication is conceived of as a type of transport activity. Accordingly, meaning is understood as ‘sent’ or ‘received’ between people, institutions, or other agents. At face value, this approach appears innocuous. Serious problems, however, emerge when we delve beneath the surface of this common rendition of communication.

One key problem with a view of communication as transmission is that it overstates the information value of any of the things allegedly sent or received in communication. In popular culture we hear pundits ask ‘what message does politician x’s speech, clothing, or hairstyle send?’ By extension, then, communication is approached as an action which either happens or does not happen at any moment in time. Consider, for example, those popular programs on television which often provide pointers about ‘communicating more’ with loved ones. Programs such as these occasionally feature ‘experts’ who diagnose problems from people ‘not communicating.’ What is missed in these examples, of course, is recognition that communication is ever present. Using the above ‘diagnostic’ approach seen on daytime television, a family member who stomps their feet as they leave a room during a disagreement is seen as not communicating. Similarly, remaining silent in the face of a verbal confrontation is also seen as avoiding communication. In sum, a view of communication as information transmission is informed by the following:

- Communication is a linear activity.
- Communication is something that one does – one ‘communicates.’
- Communication is a sporadic activity – sometimes it proceeds, sometimes it does not.
- Communication carries meaning to those exposed to it.
- The meaning of ‘communication’ is found in review or study of the information contained in messages ‘sent’ or ‘received.’
- Things outside of communication (personality traits, demographics, social structure, etc) drive communication and provide an accurate basis to understand the meaning and impact of ‘messages.’
- A channel or medium is the conduit through which communication carries messages.

When we conceive of communication as the transmission of information, messages, or meaning we miss the larger overarching function of communication. Contemporary theorists of communication such as Pearce (2007), Cronen (2009), and Penman (2012) maintain that the above view of communication is inadequate.

For Pearce (2007), the prevailing approach neglects the fundamental basis of coordination brokered in moments of communicating. In this view, coordination is required for persons to enter into moments of communication. To use a very common example stated above, consider once again issues of communication between partners in a romantic relationship. Both partners in a relationship enter into communication in and across a variety of their day-to-day interactions. And this is the case even when they have – or make – an argument.

While such arguments are often unpleasant, partners do have different sets of options for their next moves. A ‘communication’ analyst might prove useful to remind them that their tacit agreement to engage in an argument actually marks common ground and at least a partial effort to coordinate. Rather than diagnosing the conflict as ‘not communicating’ when we study the larger patterns of conjoint interaction we begin to understand that partners can re-coordinate their efforts in whatever communication they are actually practicing. In effect, when couples bicker the problem is not that they are not communicating but in fact are communicating all too well. The meaning shared through such a scenario? “A: I’m angry! B: Oh yeah, so am I!”

1 ‘One’ may be an individual person, an organisation, or an office. The point here is that communication is often approached as emanating from a particular – and identifiable – source.
For Cronen (2009), the prevailing view of communication underscores dualistic notions of personhood and community. In the examples above, personhood and community are approached as first-order organising entities. In other words, persons – as well as relationships and communities – communicate. Following this view, persons, relationships, and communities are not seen as constituted in communication. For the Australian communication theorist Robyn Penman (2012), the issue is simple: common approaches to communication marginalise communication itself so thoroughly that it [communication] is not actually taken seriously as an independent subject of inquiry or reflection.

To place communication at the centre of our focus is to treat it as something far more than a mere vehicle for the conveyance of ideas as portrayed in the classic empirical/administrative transmission model or the semiotic/cultural studies encoding-decoding model. Both of these models and their associated historical traditions share the same foundational presumption that communication can be seen as simply an instrument to bring about an effect. Most notably, both traditions separate people from their activities in the meaning generation process and ignore (or deny) the relational or interactive nature of the process (Penman, 2012, p. 9).

For university students, the relational nature of communicating is essential to their success as both learners and social beings. For this reason, student services stand to benefit from an alternative definition of communication.

**Perspective #2 – The Communication Perspective**

Below, and in contrast to the above approach, is what contemporary theorists simply call ‘the communication perspective.’ Specifically, a communication perspective maintains:

- Communication is an ongoing, overarching and primary activity.
- Communication is an activity into which one ingresses or participates.
- Meaning is made by persons - but neither randomly nor individually. Meaning is generated through orientation to socially emergent and historically grounded rule-governed behaviours.
- Communication itself is akin to an environment of meaningful behaviours. The “objects and events” of our social worlds are made in communication and these function as patterning surrounds (Pearce, 2007, p. 179).
- Communication is an activity in which we live. There’s no ‘outside’ communication.
- Communication is inherently social and multi-functionally mediated.

The communication perspective (Pearce, 1989, p. 24).
This diagram is a general visualisation of communication in step with the above six points. Again, it is important to be mindful that communication in this sense is not something that persons do but rather an activity in which one participates. In this way, communication is both a practice and a meaningful space in which one is both located and constituted. Thinking about our respective roles of providing student services, we are free to use the model above to envision any number of interactions (practices) with students for which we are required to share and shape a variety of policies or advice (resources).

The figure also contains linked arrows which are designed to capture the ongoing, iterative process of communication. What this means for us in our work with students is that we have both an opportunity and obligation to meet students across the multiple times by which they contact our universities. Importantly, the above sketch is penned at a very general – and abstract – level. Accordingly, the illustration can function as a heuristic to help us reflect upon our roles within our university’s communication environment(s). Moreover, conceiving of communication as an ongoing and expansive activity can also permit us to think about both face-to-face and telemediated applications. Ironically, as our interactions come to depend more on digital and other telemediated moments, we need to consider the interpersonal and practical impact of these on students. Indeed, there is still a strong role for the interpersonal administration of student services and we need to be mindful of this. Turkle (2011) has written about the sense of isolation contemporary university students feel when they rely on Facebook rather than having a chat with people in their classes or living in the next room in university accommodation. These students crave interpersonal interaction and our support services should be ready to deliver it.

**Practical steps towards embracing and employing a communication perspective**

Approaching communication with the above six alternative tenets in hand calls for changing how we speak and listen to students. This is no theoretical exercise, however. There are practical outgrowths of adjusting how we ‘act into’ the context of delivering student services. But how do we start? Consider, at minimum, the following action points:

1. **Listen actively and paraphrase student responses**

   If we truly begin to see communication as a conjoint activity, the first step towards planning a communication campaign is not speaking – or assembling ‘key messages’ – it is listening. Actively listening to students provides a clear sense of where they stand. This is their context. As communication is a means by which to act into context, we’re better prepared to work with students when we listen to them both actively and carefully. One very practical means to accomplish this is to paraphrase.

   Paraphrasing is one means by which to actively listen. By placing what we hear from students into our own language and repeating it back to students, we’re checking its resonance with the students themselves. This is particularly useful when speaking to students expressing challenges with academic projects or assessments. As the institutional representatives on areas of student success, time management, or advising, our first tendency is to offer them what we see as a solution. By taking a step back and paraphrasing, we’re checking our intent against where the students actually stand. Paraphrasing provides a conversational ‘hook’ for students to grasp hold. In the end, actively listening helps provide coordination between student and service provider. Doing so enhances the likelihood students will comply with what we offer as solutions to their problems.

2. **Practice the platinum rule**

   The Golden Rule is ‘golden’ but only works in a fully monocultural setting. It makes sense to do onto others as you would have done to yourself only if there’s one way to do things. The rich diversity of learners in our Universities begs for another way. One possibility is the platinum rule. The platinum rule works hand-in-hand with both paraphrasing and listening actively. It states simply “Treat others the way they wish to be treated.” There are a number of implications for this. For example, by what name does the student wish to be...

---

2 The precise origin of this term is difficult to pin down. Various blogs and websites make use of it. I encountered the term in a Ph.D. paper in Intercultural Communication at the University at Albany – State University of New York in the 1990s.
addressed? Also, by what medium might the student wish to be – or not be – contacted? Holding a position of leadership in our universities with students requires that we uphold those standards which help students succeed both academically and personally. We need to approach this work as a way that mirrors, largely, the orientations taken by the students themselves. Practicing the platinum rule reminds us that there are other ways. Using it to discover what a student practices helps guide us towards coordinating with them.

3) Be open to speak to and learn from others

Considering communication as an iterative, ongoing activity also suggests that students have things to teach us as well. The communication perspective sees all parties to communication as connected to each other. At times these nuggets of discovery come in the form of a complaint about something that’s not going particularly well in the university. We can see this, however, as feedback about what we might offer in solution of it. As noted above, our students come from a diversity of social, cultural, and economic frames. They bring with them experiences and knowledge which we might not see as useful to our operations. Real engagement requires investment between both students and the university. Sending more messages will not broker this connection on its own. Building connected, high quality service delivery must be informed by a true openness towards those to whom our services are oriented.

4) Utilise multiple channels to elicit student engagement and investment

University staff working in student services possess a variety of media - or channels - of communication. Many of these are implicit and under-utilised in our reflections about how we reach and interact with students. Consider, for example, the physical location of our offices. Are we located in an area of high foot traffic, for example? Are our offices shared with other service providers? For example at Massey University in Wellington, the Centre for Teaching and Learning is located within the award-winning newly refreshed Library. When students enquire to meet with me they often ask where we’re located and express surprise and relief when I tell them we are in the library. In this way, our centre is already nestled within another more readily known place on campus. This means we should capitalise on this location and use it as a medium to connect with students. In this sense of the word, a medium is any identifiable physical object around which people can organise and coordinate their communication. Universities are built upon a variety of physical places and approaching our physical offices as a medium for engagement encourages interpersonal connection with students.

In addition to the places and spaces physically occupied by student services, we also need to attend to those more traditional ‘media’ of communication such as email, telephone, facebook, twitter, notice boards, university apps, newsletters, brochures, booklets, as well as university webpages and online learning platforms. I hesitate to make use of the term ‘social media’ here because the alternative view of communication advanced in this essay sees all communication as inherently social and mediated. Moreover, it is more fruitful to speak of communication as either more or less telemediated. In practice, telemediation occurs on a continuum. Obviously, Apps Facebook and University websites are more telemediated than a face-to-face chat. All of these moments of communicating, however, are social as the relationships and shared knowledge which make them possible are always part of the guiding principles we follow to ‘act into’ communication across them.

When employing various media it is also helpful to think about our campaigns as invitations. We do not, and in fact cannot, communicate with or to students. What we need to focus on is the idea that we can use media to invite students into communication. This is a very different means by which to approach communicating and requires mindfulness towards to students. Indeed, we wish to meet students where they are in our shared effort to bring them where they need to be.

**Conclusion**

By listening and speaking broadly, we can study and better act into successful communicational moments with clients. Taking a communication perspective, we can appreciate how the interactions we hold with our student populations help guide students to successful outcomes. An added bonus to taking a communication perspective is enriching both the reach and quality of the services we deliver. Communicating well means thinking about more than messages. It means comprehensively considering media and including the physical
spaces in which we work as well as the other people with whom we share our jobs as part of the overall communication environment used to connect with students. Communication is an ongoing, coordinating practice and requires mindful appreciation. By actively practicing the four points outlined above, student services are better positioned to serve their constituencies. In the end, this leads to more successful outcomes and also an enhanced visible presence for student services across the university sector.

References


