

Module 2 Module Notes

Communicating in Culture



Figure 1. Photograph of a culturally diverse group of people socializing outdoors. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica ImageQuest: http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/people-talking/1/158_2475195/Family

We talked a lot about culture in the first Module. Now it is time to turn our attention more fully to the communication piece – our goal being to understand how culture and communication are mutually supportive and intertwined. The first order of business is to understand some basics regarding communication, so that we can understand how it functions within culture.

Communication Is Transactional

The first thing we need to understand is that communication is a transaction. It is a scenario in which people are sending and receiving messages by using symbols – the goal being to arrive at shared meaning. These symbols that people are using to express ideas can be both verbal and nonverbal. Gestures can be symbols; speech can be symbols – even simple display signs from our daily life can be symbols (a restroom, a road sign). We call them symbols, because they are representative. So, the notion that communication is “transactional” is very basic – this



Figure 2. Photograph of a teenage male. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica ImageQuest: http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/teen-fashion/1/154_2887181/Teenage-boy-wearing-baseball-cap

sending and receiving of messages between individuals is a transaction. But the idea that communication is symbolic requires more unpacking. For example, in this above photo, it may be that the teenager is communicating a lot at a symbolic level through his mode of dress, including his hat. The messages being received may not even be intentional.

Symbolic



Figure 3. Graphic displaying symbols of family, gender, and love. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica ImageQuest: http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelior.edu/search/symbols/1/132_1355122/Family-gender-and-love-symbols

To understand how communication is symbolic, it is crucial to understand that these symbols (words and nonverbal behavior) have a relatively arbitrary relationship to the idea they are trying to express or represent. For example, you may be looking at a type of “screen” right now – or sitting at a “desk” or “table.” These are culturally agreed upon words (symbols) in the English language that represent these objects. These are merely verbal symbols used to express the idea of what these things are. Communication is a very symbolic activity, and the problem comes in when people attach different meaning to different things. Communication can lead to “shared meaning,” but communication can also be a real quagmire of misunderstanding, whether the communicators share or don’t share a cultural background. A Quagmire, as defined by the online Oxford Living Dictionaries, is “An awkward, complex, or hazardous situation.”

Shared Meaning

Most often communicators have the goal of fostering shared meaning. Even though communication can be strewn with potential misunderstanding and different interpretations, the goal is most often to arrive at a common form of understanding. The issue or “problem,” as suggested before, is that individuals are constantly interpreting the symbols. This is perhaps most



Figure 4. Graphic displaying symbols of family, gender, and love. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica ImageQuest: http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelior.edu/search/symbols/1/132_1355122/Family-gender-and-love-symbols

clearly exemplified by nonverbal communication. We may try to interpret a friend's or partner's body language and arrive at a misinterpretation. Maybe he or she was sending a message of being tired, but we see it as impatience or aggravation. This is of course not limited to nonverbals, however, for we can also think of how a friend or partner has used a phrase or word in a certain way that we misinterpreted. I'm sure that we can all think of examples (friends, family, etc.) when a misinterpretation of something someone said led to problems. Also, consider how many times a major political figure has said (or even "tweeted") something that became interpreted in different ways by different factions.

Nonverbal

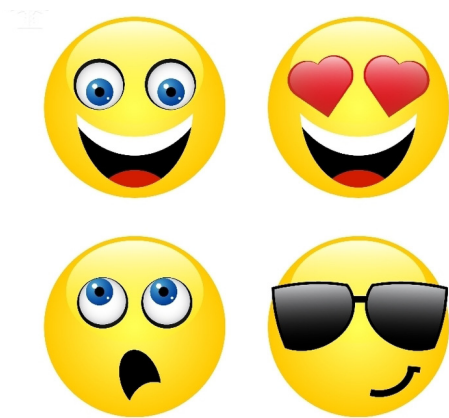


Figure 5. Four emoticons displaying different emotions. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica ImageQuest: http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/emoticon/1/186_1628204/Characters-of-yellow-emoticons

There are many types of nonverbal communication, and I'd like to acknowledge some of them here. This is not a complete or exhaustive list, but it should give you an understanding of the myriad ways in which we can nonverbally communicate. As you consider these types of nonverbals, also consider how nonverbal communication can widely vary from culture to culture. For example, I spent some time in London – and I had to adjust my habit of ordering “two” of something by putting up my forefinger and middle finger. If you make what we culturally understand to be a “peace” symbol and turn it around so that your knuckles are

facing the receiver, this is unfortunately akin to giving the “middle finger” in the United States. I had no idea how often I unconsciously did this until my English friends pointed this out to me. (In the meantime, I unintentionally caused them much embarrassment.)

Types of nonverbal communication include gestures, movement, posture, eye contact, facial expressions, and touch. There are also things that we do with our voice that can be considered nonverbal because they aren't words that are meant to symbolize specific things. These include things such as pitch, volume, emphasis and tone. For example, if someone asks me how my day went, and I respond “Great,” that symbol could mean vastly different things depending upon my tone, emphasis, gestures, and body language. I may mean that I genuinely had a “great” day – or I may be ironic or sarcastic, because I had a distinctly un-great kind of day.

Let's also not forget how we communicate through our "look." Hairstyles, clothing, jewelry, tattoos, and piercings are also symbolic forms of communication. Sometimes this can be obvious, with a T-shirt delivering a message, and sometimes this can be less obvious, with our clothing selection communicating something about us, whether we intend to or not. This, of course, may also lead to misinterpretation or simply meanings that were not intended. Whether we like it or not, these things can inform others' perception of us.

Finally, we need to acknowledge the pervasive nonverbal symbols of the digital age. Emoticons, those little faces and other types of characters that we use to add emotional context to our online and digital communication, are very useful for studying the symbolic nature of communication – because, well, they are literally symbols. And perhaps emoticons are an antidote to some of the ambiguity and misinterpretation that we experience in traditional written communication or face-to-face communication, because they work to clarify the emotional intent, especially sarcasm and irony, which can cause so much misunderstanding at times.

In Conclusion ...

We've explored the nature and implications of communication, but let's zoom back out to that big picture: culture and communication. How can one characterize the relationship between the two, beyond the descriptors I've been using (intertwined, mutually supportive, closely related)? Well, for one, culture is actually created via communication. Values, laws, practices, literature, ethics, etc. – all of these elements of culture are created and conveyed through interaction. Culture is shaped by communication, but it is also transmitted through communication. If these statements seem to put communication in a dominant or primary position above culture – well, that's not exactly correct. Because culture also shapes communication – that is, our communication practices are mostly shaped by culture. So culture

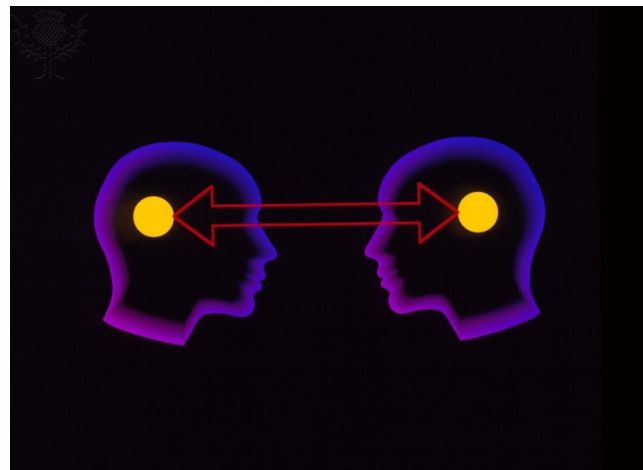


Figure 6. Abstract graphic conveying the art of communication between people. Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica ImageQuest: http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/communication-people/1/132_1289950/Abstract-artwork-of-communication-between-2-people

shapes communication and communication shapes culture. Easy, right? (Perhaps I should insert a symbol for sarcasm or humor here.)

These are very universal ideas that you can apply to most time periods, but the elephant in the room is how we are undergoing a revolution in the way we communicate due to Web-based and digital technologies and platforms. During the last two decades we have experienced sweeping changes to how we communicate – communication has changed, and many global cultures have changed as well. This is important for our purposes, because we are interested in innovative communication and its relationship with culture. One way to look at this is through the lens of creativity and knowledge. Just reflect for a moment, for example, how newer, online modes of communication have transformed how knowledge is spread. (And I am aware how relevant and profound this statement is in light of the online class we are all taking together.) Of course, there are problems with this as well as misinformation can be spread as quickly as information. We can also see how much creativity and innovation in our current age is focused upon transforming and evolving the very nature of communication itself. These are unprecedented times for communication. For example, consider American culture before and after social media. The changes are so deep-rooted and profound that the former may even be hard to conjure up in your mind at this point.

Next Steps

There is a lot to discuss moving forward: 1) The powerful relationship between communication and culture and innovation's role in that; 2) the difficulties and misunderstandings in communication and culture's role in that; and 3) all of those smiley/winky/frowny faces that we see every day.