



Critical Thinking in the Transactional Process of Communication

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Abstract

The ability to think critically while evaluating messages is a skill that benefits all individuals. Applying critical thinking to the transactional communication process teaches what to consider when evaluating messages from the *differing perspectives* of those who send and receive messages. When senders (encoders) process, organize, and deliver verbal and nonverbal messages and listeners (decoders) interpret, organize, and respond by providing feedback using verbal and nonverbal messages, they are using a transactional communication process. Knowing critical thinking skills in the process of communication enables individuals to attempt to make rational, logical decisions in their relationships in any context. Knowing and applying some theories of communication to the process can provoke critical thinking. Successful communicators evaluate messages by acknowledging and recognizing differences in perspectives based on unique frames of reference with regard to culture, experiences, expectations, gender, race, religion, and any other similarities or differences.

Keywords: Transactional communication process; Critical thinking

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บทคัดย่อ

ความสามารถในการคิดเชิงวิพากษ์ในขณะประเมินสารเป็นทักษะที่เป็นประโยชน์สำหรับทุกคน การนำการคิดเชิงวิพากษ์ไปใช้ในกระบวนการสื่อสารสัมพันธ์ช่วยให้รู้ว่าเราควรพิจารณาอะไรเมื่อเราประเมินสารที่ได้จากผู้ส่งและผู้รับสารที่มีทัศนคติที่แตกต่างกัน เมื่อผู้ส่งสารเรียบเรียงและดำเนินการส่งสารประเภทวัจนะและอวัจนะไป ผู้รับสารก็ทำความเข้าใจสาร เรียบเรียง และส่งข้อมูลย้อนกลับที่เป็นทั้งสารประเภทวัจนะและอวัจนะ กระบวนการดังกล่าวคือกระบวนการสื่อสารสัมพันธ์ การที่เรารู้เรื่องการคิดเชิงวิพากษ์ในกระบวนการสื่อสารทำให้ผู้สื่อสารและรับสารสามารถดำเนินการตัดสินใจได้อย่างมีเหตุผลในบริบทต่างๆ การรู้และนำทฤษฎีการสื่อสารไปใช้ในกระบวนการสื่อสารทำให้เกิดการคิดเชิงวิพากษ์ ผู้สื่อสารที่ประสบความสำเร็จจะประเมินสารที่ได้โดยยอมรับและรู้ถึงความแตกต่างที่มีพื้นฐานมาจากกรอบการอ้างอิงเฉพาะบุคคลที่เกิดจากความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรม ประสบการณ์ ความคาดหวัง เพศสภาพ เชื้อชาติ ศาสนารวมไปถึงความเหมือนและความแตกต่างอื่น ๆ

คำสำคัญ: กระบวนการสื่อสารสัมพันธ์ การคิดเชิงวิพากษ์

How does critical thinking apply to the transactional communication process? According to Paul and Elder (2009), critical thinking is an art; an art requiring analyzing and evaluating thinking with a goal of improving thinking. However, for critical thinking to become an art requires the ability to analyze and evaluate communication while understanding that messages vary according to similarities and differences between communicators based on individual frames of reference, experiences, expectations, the situation, the relationship between communicators. Messages are sent, received, and understood in different ways in different contexts including cultural contexts.



Hall (1959) distinguished cultures that are more reliant on verbal cues from those that are more reliant on nonverbal cues when communicating. Cultures dependent on verbal messages with less focus on the situation and on nonverbal, implicit cues are identified as low-context communication cultures because individuals tend to focus more on words than on the context or situation surrounding the communication. In low-context cultures self-expression, directness, and verbal fluency are admired (Hall, 1959). Cultures dependent on context and nonverbal cues which depend less on words are identified as high-context cultures. In high-context cultures nonverbal cues, indirectness, ambiguity, and silence are admired (Hall, 1959). Cultures using low-context communication tend to be individualistic while cultures using high-context communication tend to be collectivistic. Individuals from individualistic cultures tend to be more concerned with helping themselves in communication while individuals from collectivistic cultures tend to be more concerned with their in-group of family, community, or workplace (Triandis, 1995). The United States, Canada, Australia, and Great Britain are examples of individualistic cultures; Latin American and Asian countries are generally more collectivistic (Triandis, 1995).

With the differences in cultures in mind, the author of this paper acknowledges that parts of the following description of the transactional model and the definition of interpersonal communication, especially in the negotiation of meaning, is from an individualistic, low-context communication point of view. Later, the author hopes to learn more about and write about the collectivistic, high-context point of view with the collaboration of a colleague from a collectivistic, high-context communication culture.

The transactional model of communication represents a communication process in which the encoders and decoders perspectives are considered. The root word *trans* means “across”, “beyond”, or “through”; *act* means “to respond”. Messages are sent from encoders through



channels to decoders who respond by sending verbal and nonverbal feedback in response to messages. *Process* is also a key word implying *change*, a *system*, or a *goal* to be met. The meaning of a message is constantly changing. The goal in the transactional process is to negotiate until a meaning agreement is made among communicators. The activity of evaluating Interpersonal communication involves filtering information when sending and receiving messages in order to make sense of messages while considering the perspective of communication partners.

In the transactional process verbal, symbols stand for something else. For example, words are symbols for objects they represent. Nonverbal cues are signs between communicators in the transactional process in the form of gestures, facial expressions, haptics (study of touch), proxemics (study of space), kinesics (body language), accoutrements (anything you put on your body), paravocals (tone of voice, volume, pitch), and time factors including promptness or timing of responses. Signs and symbols are sent simultaneously between encoder and decoder whether either intends to send them or not. “One cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967) because individuals are communicating when sending verbal and nonverbal cues whether intended or not.

Messages are decoded in the encoder’s mind, organized and formed into messages and delivered from the unique perspective of the encoder in a unique setting at a unique time and place to a unique receiver. The perspective of the sender includes the views of the sender from his or her unique frame of reference which is influenced by his or her unique experiences including the culture to which he or she belongs. The meaning of the message can be changed from the intended meaning by noise (physical, mental, semantic), by the context or environment, and by the decoder’s interpretation based on his or her own unique frame of reference. Looking for verbal and nonverbal feedback or responses can help the sender understand whether the message had the intended meaning. A more closely shared field of experience or frame of



reference is more likely to result in shared meaning. Therefore, the more different the experiences or frames of reference of communicators the more negotiation in meaning is needed to create understanding.

The responsible encoder supplies the necessary information in an understandable method so that his or her intended meaning is shared as closely as possible while realizing frame of reference (including cultural differences), environment, noise, relationship, and the channel chosen to send the message affect the meaning of any message. Considering feedback (verbal and nonverbal cues) is vital. In an ideal situation, communication exchange partners *observe, listen* and *discuss* their interpretations of messages to ensure understanding in a nonthreatening manner. Individuals in individualistic cultures tend to talk more and listen less while individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to listen and observe more and talk less. It seems that high- context communicators from collectivistic cultures and low-context communicators from individualistic cultures can learn from each other to create more understanding in the transactional process if the effort is made.

Individuals can more easily understand the transactional process by looking at one definition of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is a transactional process of exchanging messages and negotiating meaning to convey information, to establish and maintain relationships, and to negotiate and maintain identity.

Again, the transactional process stresses the importance of understanding that messages are sent *simultaneously* between encoders and decoders. In other words, each person in the process is sending and receiving nonverbal messages simultaneously and constantly whether intended or not (Watzlawick et al., 1967).



In the process of exchanging messages, both the encoder and decoder change. Conversations change. Messages change. Identities change. Exchanging information is a “give and take” process between encoders and decoders. To form and interpret messages, people combine symbols and signs to make sense of messages. They attempt to achieve goals of understanding. Messages supply information.

While negotiating meaning, individuals work together to attempt to work out meaning (to try to understand). The negotiation of meaning takes time. An individual might say, “From my point of view, I think you said or implied ._____. Am I correct?”

Verbal and nonverbal messages convey information to create understanding or to persuade. To establish and maintain relationships implies that individuals form and maintain or destroy relationships through communication.

Identity is formed and maintained through negotiation of meaning. Jung and Hecht (2004) state, “An individual’s identity is created through internalization and negotiation of ascribed identities by others. The co-created identity is avowed in communication and adjusted again by others’ ascriptions” (p. 266). Individuals become the image created by others combined with the image created by themselves as a result.

Two of many theories of communication that can be applied to the critical thinking process for analyzing and evaluating messages with a view of improving communication are Grice’s (1989) maxims and Toulmin’s (1958) method of logic. Grice’s theory involves the responsibility of the encoder and the expectations of the receiver. Toulmin’s model is meant to explain logic of messages.

Grice (1989) explains four rules or maxims to better ensure understanding. Grice says the encoder should be truthful and supply evidence to support claims or assertions (maxim of quality), an encoder should supply the necessary amount of information to create understanding (maxim of quantity), an encoder should supply information relevant to the conversation and



relationship (maxim of relation) and an encoder should send a clear message (maxim of manner) by avoiding sending obscure expressions, by avoiding sending ambiguous messages, by sending brief messages and by sending orderly, organized messages. However, the needs of the encoder and decoder relating to the maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner vary according to culture, expectations, context, gender, relationship, and other aspects of communicators' frames of reference or fields of experience. The amount, the manner, and the type of information required from the encoder or expected from the decoder vary from culture to culture and from person to person. In individualistic cultures such as the United States, the encoder typically expects more direct, verbal information for clarity (maxim of manner) while in a collectivistic society, less verbal and more implicit and nonverbal messages are typically expected.

Grice's (1989) maxims relate to Toulmin's (1958) model of practical reasoning in which an encoder supplies evidence for claims or assertions providing the needed amount of relevant information to support a claim in a manner that promotes understanding. There are three major parts to Toulmin's model: the claim, grounds, and warrant.

- Claim - The claim is the point a communicator is trying to make; a proposition or assertion the encoder wants the decoder to accept. Claims are in the form of facts, policies, and values. Facts focus on verifiable information. One has proof that his assertion is true. Policies advocate a course of action. Policies state what should be done. Values involve judgments, opinions, attitudes, and evaluation of things.
- Grounds - A critical thinker as decoder will ask the questions, "How do you know?" "Why?" "What is your proof?" The answers to these questions are the grounds. The encoder realizes that he or she should have grounds and proof for the claim.



- Warrant – The warrant connects the claim with the grounds. The warrant is typically implicit (unstated) and requires the listener to recognize the underlying reasoning that makes sense of the claim in light of the grounds. Warrants can be based on Aristotle's (Aristotle, trans. 1954) *ethos* (source credibility, authority), *logos* (reasoning-giving, induction, deduction), and/or *pathos* (emotional or motivational appeals).

Toulmin's model (1958) includes a second triad. The three elements are *backing* which provides additional justification for the warrant, the *qualifier* which states the degree of force or probability to be attached to a claim, and the *rebuttal* which acknowledges exceptions or limitations to the argument admitting to those circumstances in which the argument would not hold.

In summary, considering different perspectives of encoders and decoders is paramount when thinking critically during the transactional communication process. The requirements of quality, quantity, relevance, and the manner in which messages are sent and received differ according to cultures, frames of reference, expectations, gender, age, the situation, the communicators' relationships and other similarities and differences. Understanding is enhanced when differences are acknowledged, rules of communication are learned and applied, and logical evaluation is used by encoders and decoders. Imagine the relief of knowing that understanding has been created and that mundane or important decisions have been made based on an informed and skilled evaluation of information under the circumstances, situation, and environment.



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