The complexity of communication in a course environment: a case study

R., Juan Santandreu
Lander University

Susan Shurden
Lander University

Michael Shurden
Lander University

ABSTRACT

Communication is not a simple concept. On the contrary, it is one that entails multiple aspects of a complex process. It is interesting to see that there are many definitions of communication, some of which, in the authors' opinion, fit better in the educational environment by considering the impact of communication as one that influences all disciplines in their search for academic excellence (*Merriman-Webster,* 2009*).* Under specific circumstances, for instance in a course environment, in a class project or assignment, communication takes a central role of clearly identifying the situation or problem at hand, providing guidelines that allow all parties involved— professor(s) and students—to have a clear perspective on the requirements and expectations on the part of the instructor(s) in terms of the final outcome, including the time frame for accomplishment (Frymier, 2005). It is in this area where the authors wanted to explore some of the intricacies of communication using a realistic case scenario. This preliminary study, as part of a larger effort to evaluate both ethical and communication aspects of the complex multifaceted interaction between the instructor(s) and students, will address communication issues related to specific project(s) or assignment(s) as part of course work.

Key Words: communication, education, assignment, project, teacher, student

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication is a complex process that takes different forms or disguises (i.e., oral, written, kinetic), and it is well embedded in everything we do as individuals or as part of a social structure. The principal aspect of communication is that it allows us as human beings to share and receive information, define or clarify issues, present or understand views or opinions, and also express or perceive feelings (*Merriman-Webster,* 2009). When it comes to communication, there are an abundance of definitions that vary depending on multiple perspectives. Some of the definitions provided by the *Merriam-Webster OnLine* dictionary include: "an act or instance of transmitting information…," "a verbal or written message." Another definition is "A process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior. In the educational setting, however, the authors consider a more appropriate definition to be the one provided by *OSPI* Superintendent of Public Instruction, (2009), State of Washington, which states that:

"Communication is defined as the process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding. This process requires a vast repertoire of skills in intrapersonal and interpersonal processing, listening, observing, speaking, questioning, analyzing, and evaluating. Use of these processes is developmental and transfers to all areas of life: home, school, community, work, and beyond. It is through communication that collaboration and cooperation occurs."

The OSPI, (2009), also considers the educational impact of communication, as one that influences all disciplines in their search for academic excellence.

In the authors' opinion, business communication is recognized as an essential part of leadership. Business leadership cannot exist without the management's ability to communicate with a variety of stakeholders effectively. The authors' further contend that in today's complex business environment, many of the problems that organizations face could be traced to lack of proper internal or external communication. When there is not a clear exchange of information or ideas between managers and subordinates—and vice versa—at different levels of the organization, failure is almost assured.

The authors' recognize that in business education the focus is placed on the importance of two basic types of communication (oral and written); however, in the business arena, instructors such as ourselves also recognize the importance of nonverbal communication (body language) which involves a complex combination of facial expression, as well as hand and body movements. These nonverbal cues allow business people to project confidence and professionalism so essential to leadership. This is one of the main reasons why the authors believe that in business education, case analysis and presentations, communication—which frequently combines oral, written, and kinetic—is essential in the development of well rounded business professionals.

In terms of communication, the authors have observed that the dynamics increase when it comes to the interactivity and information exchange that occurs in a course/class setting. Here it is not unusual to find multiple interactions between instructors, instructors and students (and vice versa), and between the students. Therefore, the authors observe that a very rich and complex communication environment requires a well orchestrated system to manage all the information necessary to accomplish the assortment of tasks required to successfully achieve the expected goals.

As instructors themselves, the authors have noted how interaction between instructors becomes very relevant when shared teaching of a course occurs, and also when a common project or assignment encompasses more than one course. It is in this situation where clear communication must take place to provide a way to effectively coordinate in class, or out of class, activities or topics. The case scenario considered for this study could be a good example of ineffective communication strategies. Interaction between students and faculty, according to Lau, provide for the students a positive educational experience and enhances their development (Lau 2003). A number of studies support the idea of a positive relationship between instructor-student interaction and diverse educational outcomes (Straus and Terenzini 2007; Ishiyama 2002; Cabrera, Colbeck, and Terenzini 2001).

The authors contend that if interaction between the instructor and the student requires effective communication skills, the same can be said about the reverse situation (between the student and the instructor). According to Frymier, (2005), students should possess the ability to communicate effectively with their teachers. Students play an important role in the interactive communication environment of a course. Asking the right questions at the right time helps them to clarify ideas, concepts, or expectations from the instructor. Student interaction also provides a different perspective on issues that help instructors to have a better understanding from matters pertaining to materials covered in class, to concerns about projects or assignments given.

A case study, based on a real project assignment given in a graduate program, was prepared by one of the authors and used as the basis for evaluating ethical and communication issues. The case provides details on the interactions which occurred between instructors, instructors and students (and vice versa), and between the students.

CASE STUDY

The following case study was given as an assignment to undergraduate business students in a small, southeastern, public university. A sixteen questions questionnaire was provided for students to share their perceptions regarding the ethical and communication issues of the project assignment presented in the case. The questions were objective and demographic in nature. The focus of this paper is an analysis of how the students regarded the case study from a communications perspective.

"Sally was assigned a group project in her ethics class. The only instructions given by her instructor were to write a paper and meet on a virtual reality website where interactive "chat sessions" can be held. The group consisted of 7 other people of whom she had never met and who, she thought, were in other classes at the university. There were four teachers involved in assigning the project. According to her syllabus, the project is 20% of her grade. However, with one of the other teachers, the assignment is pass or fail, and yet another teacher is not going to even count it as a grade. It is currently February 6, and the project is due on March 6. Sally immediately "jumps in" and e-mails her group, trying to arrange a group meeting on the interactive website. She receives positive responses from 3 of the 7 other people. One girl named Cindy e-mails and says she is busy on another project and does not have time to "even think" about this one until she is done, which will be February 23, and that she cannot meet with the group right now. One girl named June, e-mails that she does not know what is going on and does not

know anything about the project. She asks numerous times to be removed from the e-mail list. Two of the girls never respond. Sally and the other 3 students begin work on the project. Sally also e-mails the teacher of the problems she has encountered so far. He does not seem to care and thinks she should be more understanding of Cindy's situation. Two weeks go by and the paper is completed. However, Sally had agreed to contact Cindy after February 23, of which she now does with little positive response. Also, one of the girls named Kim, who had never responded, now e-mails that she has been busy with a conference and is now ready to work—recall the project has been assigned for two weeks. Sally contacts the teacher about this problem, and he agrees to move her to a new group. Meanwhile in class, many of the students are complaining about the group project and the fact that some of the people in another teacher's class do not seem to know about the project. The teachers decide to have a meeting among them. It is now a week before the project is due, and the girl named Cindy (who had been working on another project) sends an e-mail from her teacher that the deadline has been extended until March 27. Sally tells her that the project is virtually finished, and if she does not send in her part of the project, she will have to do editing on her own. Cindy is furious about an ultimatum and tells her teacher, who "slams" Sally for setting deadlines and trying to "run the show". As the week goes on, two other students in another class are finally told about the project from their teacher and now want to work. With reservations, Sally tells them what to contribute, which they do. The team now has a 50 page paper to turn in. But, guess what, the teachers meet again and decide instead of a paper, they want a "wiki" page created on the project, which is similar to Wikipedia, whereby the team can add their material and edit one another's work."

METHODOLOGY

The population of interest was represented by business students from a small public university in a southeastern state. A convenience sample of eight business courses was selected. From a captive population of 158 students, 122 questionnaires were collected, none of which was rejected for lack of completion or other concerns. This provided an effective response rate of 77.2%. Students were properly informed about the purpose of the study, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Proper research procedures were applied to assure the students' anonymity, to maintain the privacy of the information, and to avoid duplications in participation. Classificatory questions were used to be able to evaluate potential differences between the participants.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Table 1 (all tables are in the Appendix) shows the characteristics of the students who completed the survey. Of the students surveyed, 56 percent were male, and 44 percent were female. There were no freshmen surveyed, while 1 percent were sophomores; 27 percent were juniors; and 72 percent were seniors. Of the business students surveyed, 17 percent had an accounting emphasis; 8 percent had an economics/finance emphasis; 21 percent health care management emphasis; 51 percent management/marketing emphasis; and 3 percent had other majors (Table 1).

Table 2 presents the student responses to the survey instrument. Sixty-nine percent of the students surveyed strongly disagreed and 20 percent disagreed that the project was planned out carefully by the instructors. Also, 83 percent of the students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the objectives of the project assignment were clearly developed by the instructors. Poor planning can often lead to poor communication, which was the case between the instructors. This concern was also apparent when 89 percent of the students in question 11 indicated the existence of coordination/communication problems between the instructors. This poor communication also resulted between instructors and students, as demonstrated in questions 3 and 5 whereby, 80 percent of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the students received adequate instructions, and 76 percent of the surveyed students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the students in the case were properly informed about the expected outcome/evaluation method of the project. As mentioned in the case, one instructor indicated that a paper was due which was 20 percent of that classes' grade; whereas, another instructor gave the outcome as pass/fail, and yet another instructor was not going to count it (Table 2).

This analysis of communication definitely ties in to questions 12-14, indicating that lack of knowledge leads to uncertainty (44 percent of the students strongly agree and 38 percent agree); uncertainty leads to lack of interest (37 percent strongly agree and 43 percent agree); and lack of interest leads to lack of participation (44 percent strongly agree and 41 percent agree). Lack of participation definitely occurred in several instances. One case was with June, who had not been told of the project; therefore she came in late and did very little work. The other case was with Cindy, who appeared to have a lack of interest, being more concerned with the other project that had been assigned to her. Consequently, she too contributed very little, yet it is assumed both of these girls received the same grade as the remainder of the group. Kim, who had been busy with a conference, again indicating a lack of interest in the project, was transferred to another group because of the intervention of the teacher in Sally's class (Table 2).

Additionally, communication problems existed between the students as reported by 91 percent of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement in question 10. Another issue that shows lack of proper communication between instructors and students is reflected in question 6, which stated "The students were aware of their team composition or membership." Forty eight percent of the students indicated disagreement with this statement, while 22 percent indicated strong disagreement. Again, June was not even made aware of the project until later in the month. Also, the students only interacted via e-mail or the virtual reality site. It appeared that only Sally and three other students made significant use of these methods whereas the other three were either not informed in a timely fashion or had little interest because of other commitments. Then, it is evident that "coordination/communication problems" existed between the instructors as indicated by a 52 percent strong agreement and 37 percent agreement response. The instructors apparently had few meetings other than the one they held a week before the assignment was due (Table 2).

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The opinion of the authors is that the issue of communication in a course setting is a complex one. Multiple factors and interactions between and among different constituencies are present. Also different circumstances can alter the best intentions of providing appropriate information by communicating effectively. This case study by no means intends to resolve or clarify all these complex interactions, but it provides a small window to evaluate some frequently present concerns about communication issues that affect positive results in the educational environment.

The results of the case study clearly demonstrates the relevance of communication in a course environment where interactions between instructors, instructors and students (and vice versa), and between students is essential to the success of any academic experience.

A suggestion by the authors to make this type of project more useful and "workable" would be tied to the issue stated in question 7 "Groups should be more compatible". A total of 82 percent of the students surveyed either indicated strong agreement or general agreement that the groups should be more compatible by using either groups within the same class or students with similar schedules.

Surprisingly, the answer given to the statement in question 8 "changing the outcome in mid-stream to a wiki page was appropriate for the students" had an interesting response. Sixty six percent of the students indicated a strong disagreement that this was a problem, whereby 22 percent indicated disagreement that this was a problem. The authors contend that perhaps the students did not fully understand this question. Changing the requirements of the assignment so late would clearly cause more confusion and misunderstanding. In a number of questions concerning the ethical aspects of the project, the majority of respondents indicated that ethical concerns were paramount. The ethical aspects will be explored further in a subsequent paper.

In reference to the question of whether or not this was an excellent project, only 5 percent indicated strong agreement or general agreement; an overwhelming majority, 90 percent, indicated disagreement or strong disagreement with this statement. In the authors' opinion, this type of project would be totally unsuitable to an undergraduate class, and if used in a graduate level class, should be modified to include better communication among all parties involved. Additionally, the authors believe that the project had significant flaws, which could be attributable to a "learning curve" on the part of the instructors involved. However, perhaps the project was intended to be ambiguous in nature. The instructors may have been obtaining research material for a future paper; however, if this were the case, it was not indicated to the students involved, or permission given on their part.

Considering this case scenario, the authors believe that an important learning experience is that communication between the instructors—participating in the planning and preparation of a course, or a project assignment—is essential in order to provide to the students clear definitions, objectives, and expectations.

We believe that this in turn will facilitate the management of a course or a project assignment, enhance the learning experience for the students, and make possible a proper and fair evaluation of the results. Much more work is necessary in this area of communication in a course setting especially in the area of how to communicate the idea

of the complexities and importance of communication in a dynamic and very interactive environment of a class. This research could lead to academic training, course modifications to place more emphasis on the relevance of communication in a class setting, or even open discussions between all parties (present in the case scenario) to advance knowledge and achieve the always essential positive final results.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Description	Gender	Classification	Emphasis
Male	56%		
Female	44%		
Freshman		0%	
Sophomore		1%	
Junior		27%	
Senior		72%	
Accounting			17%
Economic/Finance			8%
Health Care Management			21%
Management/Marketing			51%
Other			3%
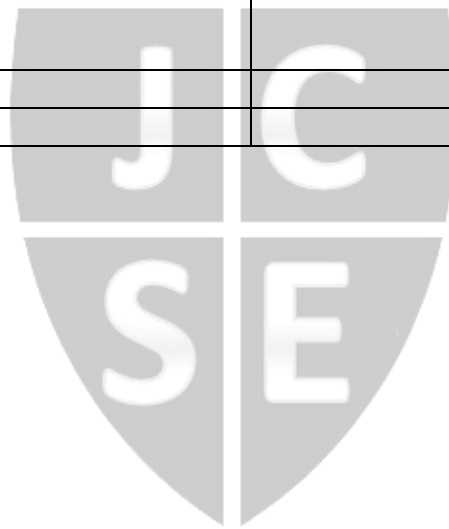
Table 2
Survey Results

Statements	Levels of Agreement*				
	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. The project was well planned and prepared by the instructors.	2%	3%	6%	20%	69%
2. Project objectives and/or materials were clearly developed by the instructors.	1%	9%	7%	34%	49%
3. The students received adequate instructions.	0%	7%	13%	33%	47%
4. Instructor using different evaluation methods for the same project created an ethical dilemma for the students.	41%	41%	8%	8%	2%
5. The students were properly informed about the outcome/evaluation of the project.	0%	12%	12%	43%	33%
6. The students were aware of their team composition or membership.	3%	16%	11%	48%	22%
7. Groups should be more compatible. (i.e., same class, similar schedule)	48%	34%	14%	3%	1%
8. Changing the outcome in mid-stream (from a paper to a wiki page) caused additional problems for students.	2%	3%	7%	22%	66%
9. Organizing and working in a group where members have different commitments and interests create an ethical dilemma among the students.	30%	37%	18%	13%	2%
10. There were communications problems among the students.	64%	27%	7%	2%	0%
11. There were coordination/communication problems between the instructors.	52%	37%	7%	3%	1%
12. Lack of knowledge lead to uncertainty	44%	38%	14%	3%	1%
13. Uncertainty lead to lack of interest	37%	43%	16%	2%	2%
14. Lack of interest lead to lack of participation	44%	41%	12%	3%	0%
15. Overall this project created an ethical dilemma among students.	49%	40%	7%	3%	1%
16. Overall this was an excellent project.	2%	3%	5%	15%	75%

*SA=Strongly Agree A=Agree N=Neutral D=Disagree SD=Strongly Disagree

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