

# INSTATING THE STUDY OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION IN A FIRST-YEAR HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING PROGRAMME

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## ABSTRACT

The article revisits the concept and phenomenon of human communication to show that it deserves to be part of a first-year undergraduate core curriculum which aims to further knowledge and advance learning. Conceptual analysis and critical and rational argumentation are employed. Teaching students about what human communication really is and, concomitantly, what it entails existentially as well as adopting the appropriate spirit, stance and method for authentic intercultural communication, could go a long way in equipping them to be critical thinkers, competent citizens, and compassionate human beings in the worlds in which they live.

**Keywords:** human communication, undergraduate core curriculum, conceptual analysis, Martin Buber, philosophical rhetoric

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

A recent South African university document (UFS 2010) on a proposed undergraduate core curriculum that focuses on *What every undergraduate needs to know* aims to “introduce first-year students to the foundational knowledges required for higher learning and for critical citizenship in an interconnected world”. The rationale for this document is that “South African students are trained too narrowly and too early in the disciplines (law, chemistry, medicine, etc.) which constitute the specializations on which their future careers are based i.e. lawyers, chemists, doctors. While such specialist, technical training is crucial for expertise in particular fields and careers, it must be completed by a broad-based general preparation in the foundations of knowledge that equip students to be critical thinkers, competent citizens, and compassionate human beings in the worlds in which they live”.

The document further states that the curriculum will be organised around nine key questions, with the academic disciplines noted in parenthesis:

- What does it mean to be fair? (Law)
- How do we become South Africans? (History, sociology)
- How should we deal with the violent past? (Pedagogy, political studies)
- “Did God really say?” (Theology, philosophy, text analysis)

- But is it really art? (Art, aesthetics)
- Do leaders change organisations (or countries) or do they simply act on what is possible in their circumstances? (Sociology, leadership studies, politics)
- When is it okay to kill? (Criminology)
- Are we here alone? (Astronomy)
- Why is the economic crisis described as “global”? (Economics)

The above-mentioned questions are relevant, interesting and should be interrogated by first-year students at an institution of higher learning, but one ventures to say that probably the most important question for any human being is not offered: What is communication, and how can it further knowledge and advance learning?

It is clear that communication, as arguably the most fundamental of all human fundamentals and the lifeblood of everything that unfolds at a university, has not been given proper consideration. It appears that it is presupposed that communication will take place when debating the nine questions, and that it (human communication) in itself is not worthy of reflection and/or deliberation. Such a position reduces communication to a mere social or skillful/artful activity - bolstered by the fact that the document states that students will gain the basic skills of, among other matters, public argumentation (rhetorical communication - own inclusion) through “the ways in which the curriculum is designed, and teaching and learning planned”.

## **2. PURPOSE AND METHOD**

This article's purpose is to revisit the concept and phenomenon of human communication to show that it deserves a rightful place in a first-year undergraduate core curriculum which aims to further knowledge and advance learning.

Conceptual analysis and critical and rational argumentation are employed. With conceptual analysis an investigation is conducted into the use of certain concepts in a given context or in all kinds of contexts. It is an operation on concepts, contrary to operation with concepts, which occurs with the spontaneous application of concepts (Kistner 1982: 64). Conceptual analysis is particularly appropriate when confusion exists or can arise about concepts.

## **3. COMMUNICATION: A BASIC VISIT**

Etymologically the word “communication” originates from the Latin *communicatio*, which has two major significations: (a) making common,

imparting; and (b) taking one's audience into one's confidence (Gepp & Haigh 1935:102).

It is with the first major meaning of *communication* that we are especially concerned. The coupling of “making common” and “imparting” seems to suggest that the “making common” implies not so much “reducing to one”, but achieving mutual understanding through “imparting” ideas.

While the concept of communication is defined and used variously in the literature of communication science, it is often reduced to mean the process of expression and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal (not-word) messages - the process of imparting ideas - between communicator and recipient, with the aim of arriving at mutual understanding on certain subject matter (De Wet 2010: 2).

Such a basic understanding of communication implies the presence of a timeless and constant structure that characterises all forms of human communication, a structure that Van Schoor (1979) calls the communication “tritych”. The structure consists of a communicator, a medium in which a message is embedded, and a recipient. Also rightfully implied in this definition is the active role of the communicator and recipient, the recipient being not merely an object to be manipulated by the communicator.

Communication always takes place within a given social circumstance or context.

The intent of inter-human communication is mutual understanding which of course distinguishes communication from the provision of mere information. “Understanding” may be explained as the knowledge that somebody has about a particular subject or situation. It denotes the culmination of a process, yet we find its actuality is a sudden insight which sometimes follows a long period of consideration. Pursuing and arriving at mutual understanding can be arduous when the communicator and recipient do not share the same linguistic and cultural codes.

While the process of expression and interpretation of messages underlies all forms of human communication (such as dyadic, small-group, or public communication), it also forms the basis of human existence.

#### **4. COMMUNICATION: A DEEPER, PHILOSOPHICAL VISIT**

In looking deeper at the phenomenon of communication, one may say that it embraces the whole of man<sup>1</sup>(human beings in their totality): it is a mode (way) of existence, an ontological concept of man's being (existence) (Van Schoor 1979: 13).

1. Note that reference to “man” here and elsewhere is inclusive of all human beings.

The existential view of communication transcends the view of communication as a social activity and holds that communication forms the centre of man's existence. Man is what he is in communication; his existence is defined by his ability to remain in communication - not only with others, as a prerequisite for any participation in the social process, but also with himself as a source of genuine feelings and appreciations of his environment (Hardt 1972: 178).

Communication is a mode of existence because it qualifies our existence, it tells something of our way of being. Therefore, the nature and quality of man's mode of existence will depend on the nature and quality of his communication, as manifested in specific forms of communication that he adopts, and which he adheres to predominantly.

In conceptualising man as a communicating being, one also proceeds from the assumption that man needs man and that man is capable of forming a living relationship with people (and with the world). But are there different ways of being in communication with others?

Existentialism often distinguishes between two major ways of existing or being in communication with others, that is inauthentic and authentic being-with-others (remembering that it is inherent in man that he simultaneously displays both these modes of existence); and specific ideal-typical forms of communication associated with these modes of existence.

In elucidating the argument for the purposes of this article, specific reference is made to selected ideas of the Jewish philosopher and existentialist Martin Buber (1878-1965). Buber is one of the foremost writers on dialogical unity which emphasises the act of meeting between two different beings without eliminating the otherness or uniqueness of each.

While existentialism has often been criticised for having an individualist bias, a few exponents such as Buber have been pioneers in the investigation of communication between different cultures which is imperative for any South African university or institution concerned with learning. We all know that communication between different cultural groups is often problematic due to various variables, such as language, perceptions, values, prejudice and stereotypes (cf. Samovar & Porter 1995).

#### **4.1. Inauthentic being in communication with others: Buber's seeming mode of existence and I-It relation**

Buber (1970) explains the nature of the relationships between people by describing two communication encounters: I-Thou and I-It. Each of these word-pairs creates and reveals a mode of existence.

For Buber the essential problem of being-with-others in communication is the duality of being and seeming, which constitute two different modes of

existence:

The one (being) proceeds from what one really is, the other (seeming) from what one wishes to seem. In general the two are found mixed together. There have probably been few men who were entirely independent of the impression they made on others, while there has scarcely existed one who was exclusively determined by the impression made by him. We must be content to distinguish between men in whose essential attitude the one or the other predominates (Buber 1965: 76).

Buber suggests that the seeming mode of existence or inauthentic being-with-others is characterised predominantly by an I-It relationship. According to Buber (1970: 53), a human being steps into the world and is present in it by uttering two primary word pairs: I-Thou or I-It. Note that the word "He" or "She" may take the place of "It". Each word pair represents a human being's specific attitude towards other humans and the world and also determines his or her specific relationship towards other humans and the world.

The difference between the I-Thou and I-It relations lie in the manner in which the I's relate themselves to other humans and the world, and not to the object to which the I relates (see Jansen 1985: 36). Thus one can have an I-Thou relationship with a dog.

When the I adopts an It-attitude, it is not an expression of his or her authentic self. He or she does not want to reveal him/herself, nor does he or she want to express him/herself in the communication encounter with the It.

The I-It relation points to a mere relation in which the It is passive. The I approaches the It as an object of experience and use - the I wants to manipulate the It - and the It allows itself to be experienced and used. Mutual participation and involvement between the participants are lacking (Jansen 1985: 35; Kohanski 1982: 20ff.).

#### **4.2. Authentic being in communication with others: Buber's being mode of existence, I-Thou relation and We community**

The being mode of existence is representative of authentic being-with-others and is characterised mainly by an I-Thou relationship or dialogue.

In the I-Thou relation, the I reaches out to the Thou with his or her whole being, and the Thou responds with his or her whole being. Both reveal an openness towards each other, mutual respect and acceptance of each other so that both can actively participate in the building up of their relationship. I-Thou thus designates a relation between subject and subject, a relation of reciprocity and mutuality.

The I reaches out to the Thou from his or her own lived experience, that is,

from his or her own solitude. Note that the I-Thou relationship cannot be sustained indefinitely and every Thou will at times become an It; through this objective knowledge is acquired and finds expression.

Intersubjectivity is implied in the I-Thou relationship; whoever the communicator may be, the recipient will be regarded as a subject in that relationship, which in turn provides for the essence of a relationship, reciprocity.

When the I and Thou meet, something happens between them. As soon as they meet, we are dealing with the interhuman realm. For Buber the unfolding of this realm implies dialogue (Buber 1965: 75; Jansen 1985: 36).

Dialogue is not mere conversation, but that which arises from a conversation, something extremely difficult to explain, and yet which is experienced as real:

The word that is spoken is found rather in the oscillating sphere between the persons, the sphere that I call 'the between'... We tend, to be sure, to forget that something can happen not merely 'to' us and 'in' us but also, in all reality, between us. Let us consider the most elementary of all facts of our intercourse with one another. The word that is spoken is uttered here and heard there, but its spokenness has its place in 'the between' (Buber 1965: 112).

As Buber (1964: 37) suggests, genuine dialogue takes place when “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them”. Note that the entering into a relation in the dialogic encounter is an act of the whole person, but it is an action which is never complete and must be repeated in every new situation.

Buber (1964: 213-215; 1965: 106-109) posits the existence of a community of several independent persons who have all chosen a life of dialogue (or authentic being-with-others), a community which he calls the We. The We is Buber's extension of the I-Thou to include more than two participants.

Buber's call for a We community, based on the dialogical principle, is one which is aimed at overcoming the dominance of the I-It world. Since the dialogical principle or authentic being-with-others is ontological, it is present, but needs to be brought to the forefront.

Buber (1964) uses the metaphor of a “narrow ridge” to describe the tenuous and uncertain nature of the we-relationship. The only certainty is that of encounter and undiscovered truth.

Meeting on the “narrow ridge” involves taking both our own and others' viewpoints into consideration in our dealings with others (Gudykunst & Kim

1992: 260). The participants in communication on the “narrow ridge” are almost like tightrope walkers. Balance is an overriding concern. Viewpoints must be considered with equal weight, if we are to meet on the “narrow ridge”. Gudykunst and Kim (ibid.) suggest that “it is the dual concern for self and other in walking the narrow ridge that stops polarized communication and allows community to develop”.

With his We community Buber thus sought a community based on genuine meeting which he maintained would provide an alternative to extreme individualism or collectivism. For Buber, individualism viewed man only in relation to himself, whereas collectivism could only view man as an aggregate.

In the place of dialogue, the prevalent mode of communication between individuals in contemporary society is what Buber (1964: 37) would call false dialogue or monologue. In false dialogue the participants do not really have each other in mind, there is no real turning to the other, no real desire to establish mutuality. In situations where people hold different points of view, each sees the other as the embodiment of a falsehood and him/herself as the embodiment of truth. There is thus a widespread insistence on only one point of view and the total rejection of all others.

In this situation there can be no meeting on the “narrow ridge” where truth and the meaning of life are discovered.

So far the article has attempted to provide a basic view of what constitutes communication followed by a deeper, existential view of the phenomenon. Some thoughts of Martin Buber on authentic intercultural communicative encounters were offered which can be applied at university. It is through the “I-Thou” and “we” stance that we will foster the spirit that we are the allies and hosts of students as we instruct and invite them to join lecturers as members of a learning community - even if they are struggling. This inviting stance should help more students learn.

In the concluding section the focus is on the way through which the advancement of learning should take place.

## **5. COMMUNICATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL RHETORIC: A PRACTICAL VISIT FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING**

Philosophical rhetoric is the way through which the advancement of learning should take place. Philosophical rhetoric, as conceptualised by Socrates and Plato, differs from what the ancient Greeks called technical and Sophistic rhetoric (see Kennedy 1980: 15ff.).

With regard to the communication triptych referred to in section 3 above, technical rhetoric was primarily concerned with the message (especially when

addressing a jury in a court of law), while Sophistic rhetoric concentrated on the role of the communicator (rather than the message or recipient). In Sophistic rhetoric the communicator seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and which may be believed.

Essentially the Sophists were interested in communication as a technical skill and as a vehicle by which the communicator manipulates recipients, through elaborate conceits and stylistic refinements of the message, to accept the communicator's point of view by appealing to their emotions (see Jansen 1983: 31).

In Sophistic rhetoric, then, recipients are not dynamically involved in communication, because such rhetoric is in essence monologic: one speaker to a target audience. The audience consists of passive recipients who are presumed to be inexpert - mere objects to be manipulated by the shrewd oratorical skills of the communicator. There is no question of the participants involving themselves in the communication process.

In contrast, philosophical rhetoric, which developed out of Socrates's objections to Sophistic rhetoric, focuses on the systematic interaction between communicator, message and recipient. As Kennedy (1980: 17) notes, philosophical rhetoric has close ties with dialectic or logic, while its natural topic is deliberation about the best interests of the recipient. Today we call philosophical rhetoric, dialogic communication or dialogue.

### **5.1. Characteristics of philosophical rhetoric**

One may summarise the characteristics of philosophical rhetoric or dialogue as follows:

- Both communicator and recipient strive towards self-actualisation by actively participating (being involved) in communication on an equal subjective footing.
- There is mutual respect, spontaneity and an awareness of the other as an individual.
- Communicator and recipient are engaged in a one-to-one relationship which presupposes an open and receptive attitude in each participant.
- There is a two-way traffic of messages since the recipient is regarded as the turning point in the communication process.
- Intersubjectivity is present in the sense that the recipient attaches his own subjective interpretation to the message in the circumstances of his own life-world. The result is that he interprets the message within his life-world, and the meaning that may have been transmitted to

everyone in general acquires significance in relation to his own circumstance.

- Each participant in communication manifests his own true self and acknowledges and confirms the other in his “otherness”.
- The participants in communication promote each other's existence in the full sense: man is allowed to stand out as human, in freedom and responsibility.
- Neither participant allows himself to be dominated and used by the other.
- Mutual understanding is emphasised, an understanding which does not depend on the exclusion of differences, but on recognition of them.

## 6. CLOSING ARGUMENT

It is through viewing communication as a mode of existence and dialogue as its ideal-typical form that one provides the foundation for asking critical and ethical questions related to life itself as experienced by us all. Moreover, it is this avenue that provides the midwifery that Socrates spoke of to foster the advancement of learning, also at university. Too often, even in small classes, message transmissions between lecturers and students are one-directional, distanced and overly rational. Knowledge and application of human communication in all its existential manifestations would empower students (and lecturers for that matter) not only to know and choose themselves, but to situate themselves appropriately when interrogating other disciplines in their curriculum.

It is no small matter that Francis Bacon's 1605 work, *The advancement of learning*, is seen in the history of classical rhetoric to represent the completion of the recovery of the strand of philosophical rhetoric against the old foe, Sophistic rhetoric. Bacon (1565-1621) gives (philosophical) rhetoric a paramount role - equal to logic - among the arts and sciences and assigns to it the persuasive function of illuminating knowledge so that it can be “seen” and understood.

Teaching first-year students the skills of public argumentation or Sophistic rhetoric is simply not enough for higher learning and “for critical citizenship in an interconnected world”. Teaching them what human communication really is and, concomitantly, what it entails existentially, as well as adopting an appropriate spirit, stance and method for authentic intercultural communication could go a long way in equipping them “to be critical thinkers, competent citizens, and compassionate human beings in the worlds in which they live”. Therefore, ideally, a study of human communication should be the first hurdle for students to cross at an institution of higher learning.

In the end it is the quality of one's communication with other human beings that determines understanding and the advancement of learning at university, and ultimately the quality of one's existence.

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