Of tail hooks and arresting wires: Coordinating communication discoveries in the classroom

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Abstract

According to Pearce (2007), implicit theories of communication are revealed through many of our day-to-day interactions. In this essay, the author argues that a major challenge faced in the teaching of communication studies is the unpacking of culturally based implicit theories of communication. Most of our students (and some of our colleagues) may not be mindful of the fact that they arrive in academe with preformed ideas about communication. Most often, the interrelated notions of individualism and information transmission imbue these ideas. Through exploration of these two building blocks of commonly held, implicit theories of communication, the author hopes to negotiate the conflict inherent in teaching communication studies while subject to such notions. Using a personal narrative gathered from his classroom experiences, he describes the ways in which the continued reliance on individualism and information transmission act as an impediment against the discovery of communication on its own terms. Instructional techniques designed to cultivate student appreciation of human communication as an inherently social activity are explored as one means of remedying this situation. The goal of this paper is to help advance the theory, practice, and teaching of the unique perspective encountered in communicational approaches. Included in this is a call for educators to be more mindful of the learning goals and implicit theories of communication contemporary college and university students hold upon arrival to our classrooms.

If you look carefully, you can see an implicit theory of communication in everything that people say or do with each other. That theory matters. It prefigures the content and quality of the conversations people have with each other and these conversations have afterlives. (Pearce, 2007, p. 30)

When I read the 2011 call for papers for the Communication and Pedagogy Stream of ANZCA, I was excited by the prospect of contributing to an area of great professional concern to me — the classroom teaching of communication studies. My remarks in this paper are based upon the experiences I have had teaching USAmerican college and university students over the past two decades. I hope that in sharing my experiences I can contribute something to a discussion which opens “new cracks in the tectonic plates” and which shifts our “thinking, practice, and teaching” of communication studies (ANZCA, 2011, PDF).
A bit of history

In 2005, I was invited to participate in a focus group conducted by Bedford St. Martin’s press in Boston, Massachusetts. Most of the members of the focus group had been in Boston to attend the annual convention of the National Communication Association being held just a few steps from their editorial offices. The session was conducted in order to gather information about what teachers of communication felt made for a good communication studies text. Seated in a tight circle with a cart of coffee and doughnuts by our side, the focus group began.

As it turns out, it was the facilitator’s opening question, asked nearly five years ago, that prompted me to write the essay presented here.

What’s your biggest challenge in teaching communication studies?

As someone who had been teaching for more than a dozen years at that point, I was eager to speak my piece. Fortunately for me, the facilitator was seated immediately to my right and she turned towards me after asking her question. My reply was this: the most challenging aspect of teaching communication studies involves the effort to migrate learners away from common sense and cultural notions of communication and towards more communicational ones.

In contrast to distinctively communicational approaches offered by the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) of Pearce (2007) and Social Communication Theory (SCT) of Sigman (1987; 1995), students often make use of commonly held notions when theorising about human communication. And, typically, these take the form of claims based on ideas grounded in psychological and/or sociological concepts. Being thus situated, students tend to approach communication as individualistic and as an activity that facilitates information transmission. In effect, at this point in their education, students possess tools that only permit them to render a portrait of what in reality is an ongoing, dynamic and coordinated process as a fixed and overly linear one.

In the focus group, my remarks revealed the sense of frustration I experienced as I attempted to move students away from seeing our field as merely derivative of or beholden to other academic disciplines. While most of the other participants nodded in agreement, a more lengthy discussion of the implications of this reality did not transpire. Today, I still feel that the most significant challenge I encounter when speaking about my work, either inside or outside the classroom, is in explaining why communicational approaches stand apart from and uniquely shed light upon human interactive processes in ways that are not, and cannot be explained by reference to psychological or sociological constructs. Craig (1999) is of particular relevance here:

Communication, from a communicational perspective, is not a secondary phenomenon that can be explained by antecedent psychological, sociological, cultural, or economic factors; rather, communication itself is the primary, constitutive social process that explains all these other factors. Theories about communication from other disciplinary perspectives are not, in the strict
sense, within the field of communication theory because they are not based on a communicational perspective.

For many of my students, to speak about communication is to speak without much reflection upon the uniqueness of communicational approaches as referenced by emergent communication theory exemplified by scholars such as Craig. This, I feel, stems from the deep interpenetration of common sense and cultural notions of just what communication is. My ultimate concern is that this type of thinking is held not only in practices within our popular cultures but also in mainstream communication research and teaching.

Common sense and cultural notions: Building and retelling implicit theories

In *My Ishmael* (1997), Daniel Quinn broaches the subject of *mother culture*. Quinn describes mother culture as the widely distributed set of ideals and worldviews common across most parts of the world today. While one might expect that cultures sampled from various points on the planet might give voice to very different worldviews, many of these have, in fact, been instructed by mother culture to speak about the value of work, for example, in remarkably similar ways. In what ways has mother culture instructed us about communication?

Individualism and communication: Mother culture’s first lesson

One idea that contemporary students hold about communication is built upon the notion that communication is instantiated, controlled, performed, or understood by reference to the study of individual communicators. Consider how Ronald Reagan is known as the great communicator, or that Madonna is praised for her ability to communicate with many different social actors and groups. While cultures may vary in their degree of individualism and collectivism, what most cultures seem to share today is the idea that communication is something that one does, and through which one hopes to afford an effect. Is it accurate to state that communication is something that an individual does (or does not do)?

I suggest that it is not. Consider the well-known position of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967). Though typically interpreted to speak about the potential for all human behaviours to be communicative, their axiom *one cannot not communicate* is indexed in Sigman’s (1987) clarification that, in fact, one does not communicate but rather participates in communication. Accordingly, if communication is a process into which one participates and is, in fact, continuous and ongoing, it therefore is not something under the control of one person – ever.
In my teaching, I have found it difficult to counter individual notions related to communication. The most useful critique of individualistic notions I have found, and which has proven useful in shifting common perceptions about human communication, is contained in a tiny fragment lurking inside Cooren and Taylor (1997). In this paper, Cooren and Taylor (1997) retell the original findings of Weick and Roberts (1993) who examined the seemingly individualistic performances of people on aircraft carriers.

Watching videotapes of plane after plane landing, it initially seems to make sense to describe the actions of pilots as individual accomplishments. As Cooren and Taylor (1997) explain, however, close inspection of social coordination reveals that each plane is actually captured or recovered. Visual inspection of aircraft successfully recovered reveals the first clue – the presence of a tail hook towards the rear of the fuselage. As we learn in the article, it is only through successful coordination between ship and plane, deck staff and pilot that a plane’s tail hook comes in contact with an arresting wire on the deck of the ship. Much to our surprise we learn that fighter jets do not and cannot land on aircraft carriers.

This is because what we call landing is actually a socially coordinated accomplishment – recovery. The implication for the choice of words between landing and recovery is hardly semantic – landing – a process guided by individual action is, technically, impossible. While Cooren and Taylor’s (1997) use of Weick and Roberts’ (1993) findings were organisational in context, I have successfully used their work to help my students understand that the plight of the jet pilot generalises to all human communications. Persons in conversation, filmmakers, and public relations practitioners cannot engage in the process of communication without interfacing their symbolic tail hooks with the symbolic arresting wires arrayed by and in concert with other communicators. Failure to coordinate the varied bits and pieces of the process of communication, results in people feeling ignored, blockbuster films remaining unsold, and corporate images being tarnished. The major idea to be learned from using Cooren and Taylor (1997) in this way is that human communication is always socially mediated and communicators always requires coordination to produce and share meanings.

Cooren and Taylor (1997) provide us with a visually compelling metaphor that illustrates the coordination required to participate in speaking and listening, electronically mediated production and consumption, and even the often taken-for-granted practice of encoding and decoding. Put in slightly different terms, Cooren and Taylor’s (1997) obscure reference can be used to help teachers of communication to visually illustrate what coordination actually looks like. Addressed in this fashion students become interested in the idea that the coordination and management of meaning, accomplished in and through communication, requires conjoint action within and across a variety of human interactive contexts (Pearce, 2007).

In contrast to such a focus on coordination, emphasis on individual behaviour obscures students’ understanding of uniquely communicational approaches. It has been my experience, in both the classroom and in reading much of our shared literature in the field, that communication is still generally conceptualised as individually controlled. I feel that the lack of sensitivity to local, socially coordinated
actions that constitute human communication perpetuates an inaccurate picture of just what communication is and why it matters.

Moving students along the route towards viewing and appreciating social approaches is no easy task. In the classroom, when I initially attempt to recast talk about communication as a social activity, my efforts are typically met with disbelief and firmly voiced opposition. As a means toward expanding my student’s horizons I begin each semester with a video clip of fighter craft and aircraft carriers without any setup. Prior to viewing the clip, I distribute index cards to the class with only one direction: in the most simple of terms, tell me what this video is about. Time and time again students fill their cards with language such as “the pilot landed his plane” or “the plane landed on the ship.”

While the precise language used varies, not a single one of the hundreds of answers I have sampled ever included a student’s claim that the ship caught the plane or that the crew coordinated recovery of the plane. Again, my point here is not semantic. The point is that the language used by students reveals their immersion in a shared, culturally based implicit theory of human action and communication – one that is biased towards individual explanations and against social ones.

This bias for an individualist view of human communication also seems to permeate academe. In the United States, for example, many universities require undergraduate students to take a paper in Public Speaking. Generally, this paper is designed to distribute skills that speakers need to learn in order to influence audiences. But are we producing leagues of highly skilled speech pilots flying in vehicles lacking tail hooks? Why do not colleges and universities teach courses in public listening? The answer, I suspect, is because though listening is gaining currency in some models of communication, we still privilege the individual role of the speaker over collectives of listeners, the producer over consumers.

I have found the use of videos demonstrating capture and recovery highly effective in helping to expand students’ knowledge of the coordinated, social nature of communication. Revisiting a video shown the first day of class again later in the semester (after students have had the opportunity to read articles in the area of social approaches to communication) really does seem to underscore what students have learned. Over the past five years, students have expressed the idea that coming to see communication not as an individual act but rather as a socially coordinated one is often the most surprising thing they report having learned through our shared work.

If we migrate our thinking about communication towards socially mediated and moderated contexts we are presented with a more firm grounding about the unique insight communicational perspectives offer our theory and practice – including teaching. This highlights what (Sigman, 1992) sees as the uniqueness of our field:

[T]here is a unique influence that the process of communication itself has in human affairs . . . [it] requires theorising not merely about communication, but from communication as well. . . In other words, the process of communication itself. . . is highly consequential, and it is the ‘nature’
of that consequentiality that should be the appropriate focus for the discipline of communication (in Pearce 1995, p. 351)

In this way we can begin to assist our students to see the vast differences between individually oriented and socially oriented models of what communication is, how it works, and why it matters to study it.

**Lesson number two: Information transmission**

The second, common notion about what communication is and why it matters is no less pervasive or difficult to reconfigure than ideas about individualism. Consider for example talk by political pundits speaking about candidates for office being motivated to “get their message out.” Consider also the rhetoric of citizens and journalists who speak about the “message sent” by advertisements, speeches, social gaffes, etc. What each of their speech acts indexes is the presumed pre-packaged *itness* of communicative messages.\(^{xiv}\)

Whatever controversies still exist around Conversational Analytic (CA) research, one clearly supported finding in this literature is the indication that the meanings which arise in interaction are conjointly produced within that interaction – they are not simply coded into or sent as pre-formed bits of information or meaning within communications.\(^{xv}\)

The idea that information gains its currency for communicators within their interactions is consistent with both Bateson (1972) and Wittgenstein (1953). Building upon this tradition, Warfield-Rawls (2008) recently published an early (1948) manuscript of the founder of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel. In her introduction to this work, she provides contextualisation for how communication and information are related to each other:

> [I]nformation only exists in and through the ways in which it is constituted and apprehended cooperatively in social situations, according to mutually oriented processes of sequential order production. Meaning is posited as order, and ordered relations between next moves, instead of as a relationship between ideas and symbols. (Warfield-Rawls, 2008, p. 13)

Seeing information as both a product of and responsive to its *use* turns most common sense and cultural notions of information and communication on its ear. Rather than viewing information as *pre-packaged* and *sent* between people using channels, it is instead seen as embodied within ongoing, emergent communicative practices. Human communication is identified as the productive, meaning-making process that actually constitutes information. In this way, communication and information are reflexively related to each other.

Certainly, speaking about information in this manner is not new. Such a perspective, however, does not seem to have been integrated into undergraduate textbooks or into our general teaching practices.\(^{xvi}\) The
idea of a unique communicational approach is, therefore, new to the undergraduates who come to our classrooms with the socially constructed idea that information is something that stands on its own. And, of course, this is most often conjoined with a commensurate view of communication as the transport mechanism that individuals use to share such pre-established meaning(s) with others.

Working with students, I encourage them to examine the socially contextualising practices we hold around the term ‘information.’ To illustrate this point, I begin by asking students to explain when three dollars is a lot of money and when three dollars is not a lot of money. USAmerican students quickly come to express the idea that three dollars is a lot of money if they are paying for a gallon of petrol and not a lot of money if given in exchange for time invested at work. In speaking through these contrasting examples, students are able to see that something as seemingly concrete as three dollars only gains an informational quality when contextualised within localised, rule-governed conversations.

The next step in my attempt to reframe student’s ideas about information involves coordinating their reactions to the reading of Bateson (1972). According to Bateson, information is not a pre-packaged and meaningful collection of symbolic materials but rather the difference that makes a difference. His metalogue “Daddy what’s an Instinct” never fails to provoke astonishment on the part of students. Working through this chapter in focus group type discussion might take a week but I have found the outcome highly successful in teaching students, by experience, what information is and how it is intimately tied to other standing patterns of communication.

In summary, and as others have already demonstrated, the shape, form, and value of any piece of communication commonly referred to as information is neither grasped nor constituted outside of socially situated practices built in and experienced through communication. It is in the ongoing production of these experiences that information becomes informative. This strikes me as an essential area in which to place more of our teaching emphasis if we hope to distinguish the core of our field from others.

Moving forward together: Teaching communicational approaches

My goal in this paper was to discuss a few of the interactions I have had with contemporary students and to use these as a means to demonstrate how we might better integrate communicational approaches into their learning. While some students (and perhaps also some practitioners) feel that communication theory is pie in the sky, Chen and Pearce (1995) maintain that theory is, in fact, a practice.

The next step in the conversation we have about who we are as Communication people might include further reflection upon how and why we should more clearly link theory and practice in our interactions with students. One rationale for this is the idea that a pragmatic understanding and application of communicational perspectives is needed more today than perhaps at any point in our history:
In a postmodern world of global communities...in which people with nothing in common must, nevertheless, use the same technologies and access the same information systems, an approach that focuses on the constitutive practices in and through which such intelligibilities are mutually constructed will become increasingly necessary as a replacement for theories what require shared beliefs and values – or matching cognitive schemes. These no longer exist – they are not only not necessary – but are not possible, or even desirable, in a diverse global community. (Warfield-Rawls (2008, p. 30)

Moving learning towards this goal will be no easy task. Teachers of communication studies will have to work diligently to unpack the common sense and cultural notions of individualism and information transmission as they apply to human communication.

In the end, students must be guided to confront what are two sides of the same coin. Taken together, implicit theories of communication are profoundly asocial. The continued, noncritical teaching and thinking about information and individualism acts as a barrier preventing further study, analysis, and appreciation of the uniqueness of human communication as the primary social activity in human affairs.

The unique insights into human behaviour offered in a communication perspective also require more attention be paid to the socially generated, followed, and applicable rules and codes (Shaminoff, 1980) that help constitute communication. Perhaps it is time to deeply question many of the assumptions we hold as accurate and true within both popular culture and academic spheres about just what communication is. More than two decades ago, Barnett Pearce (1989) made the claim that communication was a recent discovery. I maintain that the continued reliance on information transmission and individualism as basic explanatory principles within our field, as well as in the implicit theories of communication that resonate in popular culture, indicates that communication itself – the unique and primary social practice – remains largely undiscovered to this day.

References


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1 The term USAmerican was coined by Donal Carbaugh (2005). I find it more specific and less ethnocentric than the generic term American.

2 Craig, (1999/2001), Hymes (1974), Pearce, (2007), Sigman (1995), and Taylor (2011) maintain that communicational approaches must take as their starting point the situated production and coordination of symbolic meanings – messages – not, for example, personality traits and/or sociological variables.

3 Cronen (1998) represents the strongest case I have read for an all-out rejection of Psychological tenets being applied to Communication Studies.

4 Immediately prior to my departure from the University at Albany (SUNY) in 2000, a student placed a copy of Quinn’s (1997) text in my mailbox following the conclusion of ACOM 238 (Introduction to Mass Communication) – a course he had taken with me that summer. Enclosed was a note “I think you’ll really love this text – it speaks about some of the remarks you shared with us. Enjoy!” I doubt that I ever would have found this text without his assistance.

5 Quinn (1997) notes that in nearly all parts of the world, people must work as food is kept under lock and key and not given for free. *My Ishmael* inspired me to consider the value of the term Mother Culture and to extend it communicational ideas. The genesis of these ideas is not a subject of my remarks in this paper. Social constructivists such as Katriel and Philipsen (1981), however, have investigated the creation and propagation of such culturally-linked processes.

6 Taylor, now emeritus professor of the University of Montreal continues to develop the ideas put forth in 1997. See his 2011 work for further development and application of his communication theory.

7 For the purposes of using this example as a teaching technique, be certain to focus your remarks on crew interactions between and around traditional fixed-wing fighter jets.

8 This also relates to the social coordination required for take off from aircraft carriers. No traditional fighter jet can take off under its own power from the deck of a carrier. In actuality, what we commonly call take off is the result of the ship and its crew coordinating their actions to eject the pilot and his/her aircraft.

9 This idea is further developed in my remarks about information in the next section of this paper. In particular is the extract of Warfield-Rawls (2008).
The focus on content production and distribution relates to this. The idea being that the focus on individual messages excerpted from their context – either in the form of speech acts or advertisements – tells us something about the process of communication is still quite pervasive. While I am not completely discounting the importance of analysis of messages, analysis of them outside of their lived situation of action yields varying if not incommensurate meanings between researchers and communicators themselves. This is one of the general points of ethnomethodologists such as Garkinkel (1967).

I use these reactions as a means to further underscore the value of seeing communication as socially coordinated by reminding students that if they do see communication differently it is not because I communicated the difference to them, but because they have fashioned a tailhook of their own and that they have made a discovery in conjunction with myself and with their classmates.

Garfinkel (1948, in Rawls (2008, p. 26) is of particular use here. In these writings he speaks about how people learn treat “thingified” features of their world. In so doing, they produce notions of information in accordance with local, situated practices. Carbaugh (2005), Hutchby (2001), and Leeds-Hurwitz (2010) also document the primary function communicative practices hold in the production of meaningful things in people’s social interactions.

Typically, too, the concept of a pre-packed informational kernel is closely related to an individualist approach to the study of communication. Information or meanings are seen to be inside communicators and communication is the process by which these are conveyed. The distinctive contribution of CA research is that these informational meanings are, in fact, interactively produced in the give and take of, say, conversation. They simply do not exist in the persons prior to interaction. Hutchby (2001) provides a concise overview of the CA analytic perspective and contextualises it within emerging studies of new communications technologies.

Earlier this year I edited a new communication studies text for Pearson Education Press (Sterin, in press). Not a single mention of primary communicational activities inherent in message/information production was included. Absent also was any mention of Media Ecology or any systematic treatment of the study of communicative meanings instantiated in localized communities. This particular text also presented the Shannon and Weaver (1949) model as central to the examination of what communication is and how it works.

In reality, I stumbled upon the opportunity to speak about information and its relation to social contexts after I shared images I had taken while in New Zealand with students in the US. One of these images had a petrol station in the background with the amount of $1.79 on it. A student raised her hand to ask when I had been in New Zealand and when I informed the class it had been three months earlier another one said “wow, gas is pretty cheap there!” When I explained that the price was for a litre of fuel so the price per gallon is nearly four times that, a collective gasp erupted. Ever since this point, I have retold this story to subsequent communities of students to demonstrate Bateson’s idea of the “difference that makes a difference.”

An audio version of Bateson’s chapter may be found at http://www.paricenter.com/library/download/bateson.mp3