

# 3.4 People, Context and Communication

POST NOVIATE

**Aim**

- ☉ To highlight the importance of people’s interpretation of meanings with respect to their context – both in the construction (encoding) as well as interpretation of a communication (decoding)
- ☉ To study an overview of the African context of Communication.

**Materials Required**

- ☉ Pen and Paper.

**Procedure**

Different words mean different things to different people. For instance, the word witch doctor will elicit different responses from a village elder, a teacher and a sociologist. Several great people also had different definitions for words such as poverty, change, democracy, racism and peace. For example, Nelson Mandela defined racism as a system of advantage based on race as compared to the Oxford Dictionary definition – the belief that some races are superior to others whilst Mother Teresa talked of poverty/poor people as a kind of richness and richness as impoverishment.

1. What meanings/feelings arise in your mind when viewing these words in these contexts?

Word	Context	Meaning/feeling
“ambitious”	urban school culture politics religion	
“short pants”	beach office school	
“so sweet!”	pudding girlfriend puppy	

**Input**

- In any act of communication there are two things happening together. There is the CONTENT of the communication, the message that is communicated and there is the PROCESS, the way that the message is communicated. The process is often decided by the context in which the message is given.
- The context or setting is a complex kind of vehicle that, affects the message as it conveys it.
- Context normally decides for us whether we dare to speak or not, the kind of words we use if we do speak, and the way we stand or sit or act. For instance, when we enter a church, we begin to speak in whispers; we do not shout across the aisles; we may genuflect at the altar or kneel and pray, or both. The context decides for us how we behave.
- We change our behaviour and that means the way we communicate in different situations. But we remain the same person, and that is important.
- It is important that we recognise the worth of people in all contexts e.g. the man who serves in the hotel during the day and has to say “sir” and “madam” and accept criticism without answering back is the same man who when he is at home is served by his wife and chats easily with his friends. Christians are taught by their faith that everyone belongs to God. The problem arises when this is not recognised and the contexts in which people want to speak are filled with oppression.
- We need to recognise situations where the right to communicate freely, to reach out and touch one another as children of God is being denied and we need to ensure we do not practice this.
- When it comes to meaning, the context of a communicational event becomes a major component in the participants’ interpretation of its meaning.

- Before we distinguish between media, we should distinguish between the objective and the subjective in communication:

#### Objective Meaning

- Language has objective meaning (independent of the meanings we give it) in the following instances:
- A fact is an event that occurs irrespective of our knowledge or comprehension of it. Language used to describe a fact is carefully chosen.
- Technical language attempts to be as objective as possible and refers directly to the thing signified and nothing else. It is known only to those within the respective sphere of the technical study in question. E.g. the expression DPI will not make much sense to people except to those in the computer graphics and printing fields.

(DPI=Dots Per Inch or resolution of a graphic. Thus, the greater the DPI, the better the resolution, and the clearer the picture.)

#### The Subjective Meaning

More often than not, it is people who give words their meaning. Look at the following examples:

- An opinion is a point of view shared by a subject. Language is the verbal or written expression of a subject's cognitive, volitional or emotional processes. Not just dictionary words but words in contexts mean different things to different people.
- Culture: Symbols (like words, language, etc.) although necessary are not forever. They are born, they live and they die. Symbols are also nurtured within contexts. And symbols subsist as long as meanings subsist. And because meanings change according to time and space, symbols change. (E.g. Notice the various ways we use our hands in different contexts to signify different meanings. Notice again the different cultures that give hand gestures added meaning. So a hand movement cannot be interpreted uniformly for all people, time, places and cultures)
- Meanings depend on contexts that evolve and interpenetrate over time and space because people evolve.

#### Traditional African Communication Context

- In the traditional societies of Africa, communication uses more informal than formal mechanisms
- The Amhara of Ethiopia is a rumour monger; the Tiu of Nigeria is an orator, the Yoruba of Nigeria a poet who is noted for his artistry of greeting known personalities with appropriate songs.
- Also, dancing is a means of informal communication. Thus, the African dances for joy, grief, love, hate, prosperity. Singing accompanies his work activity, improving team work and promoting co-ordination in manual communal work.
- Also, written scripts existed before the Europeans arrived, Africans communicated formally among themselves by written script. The Bantu communicated through symbols and cultural scripts.
- The drum operated as an unmuffled extending medium and communicated by signature or by talking. African languages are tonal so drums were and still are built to reproduce tonal patterns of sentences through pitch, timbre and volume.
- The pipe was used to imitate songs of birds or cries of beasts thus conveying messages to hunters in the chase.
- In the African communication context, there also existed linguists who interpreted and disseminated information. They acted as messengers among the Amhara of Ethiopia and were taught secret musical notes to establish the authenticity of written notes.
- Ornaments, charms and insignia served as aesthetic as well as communicative symbols. For instance, they showed the wearer's status.
- In conclusion, communication plays an important role in cohesiveness among Africa's traditional peoples.

## Review

1. In any act of communication there are two things happening together. There is the CONTENT of the communication, the message that is communicated and there is the PROCESS, the way that the message is communicated. The process is often decided by the context in which the message is given.
2. Context normally decides for us whether we dare to speak or not, the kind of words we use if we do speak, and the way we stand, sit or act.
3. We change our behaviour which translates to the way we communicate in different situations. But we remain the same person.
4. We need to recognise situations where the right to communicate freely, to reach out and touch one another as children of God is being denied and we need to ensure we do not practice this ourselves.
5. A fact is an event that occurs irrespective of our knowledge or comprehension of it.
6. Technical language attempts to be as objective as possible and refers directly to the thing signified and nothing else.
7. Words in contexts mean different things to different people.
8. Data is information about the event – attempts to be as true to the reality as can be. Surveys, statistics, reports fall under this category.
9. More often than not, it is people who give words their meaning. This is known as subjective meaning.
10. In the traditional societies of Africa, communication uses more informal than formal mechanisms
11. Communication plays an important role in cohesiveness among Africa's traditional peoples.

## Reflection

### Risk exercise

There are five steps:

**Step 1.** The teacher asks for three volunteers who are willing to take a risk to come forward. When this has happened tell those who came up to return to their places again as the exercise is over.

**Step 2.** In plenary the teacher asks what happened and why. Ask those who volunteered why they did so and others why they did not. The students analyse what actually happened.

**Step 3.** Divide into groups to discuss 'what do I do' when there are risks that need to be taken. Is there any advantage in taking risks? What was there in the context of the class at this time that stopped me or helped me to volunteer?

**Step 4.** Return to plenary to share learning and possibly to offer ideas about changing attitudes towards risk taking.

**Step 5.** A prayer, scripture text, or a final word from the professor to close the session, then the students DO something related with the results of the exercise and do discussions.

## Relevant Skills

Give the objective and subjective meanings of the following words as they are applied in the current African context:

- Sovereignty
- Democracy
- Aid

## Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

## References

Amecea and Imbisa. Basic Human Communication. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000.

Kraft H. Charles. Communication Theory for Christian Witness. Tennessee: Abingdon Books, 1991.

