

3.3 The Levels of Meaning in Communication

Aim

To understand the different levels of communication about a particular issue.

Procedure

- Ask the class for four volunteers. Three girls and one gentleman. Appoint one lady to be the prospective wife of the gentleman. Ask them to act out a scene from the traditional African wedding whereby the gentleman is supposed to identify from a group of ladies his prospective wife. This is to be done when the ladies are fully covered up with sheets of cloth (kanga). After this acting scene, invite the class to say, ask or state anything about the short play. As the participants begin to express themselves the animator lists out their statements keeping in mind the following headings given in italics (which he/she does not immediately disclose to the class). (The statements that follow each heading below are examples):
- *Descriptive*: I like the way Joseph easily identified his bride.
- *Scientific*: How did he know which of the ladies was his bride? He must have been given a sign.
- *Educational*: What is the purpose of this part of an African wedding?
- *Psychological*: What is the main purpose of this event? Does it have any significance in the African Traditional Setting?
- *Economic*: How much is the fine paid when the man makes a mistake in identifying his bride?
- *Political*: The man who identifies his wife accurately easily commands respect from his fellow men and the society in general.
- *Historical*: This practice has been done since time immemorial. It is as old as the cultures themselves.
- *Philosophical*: What is culture? What is the purpose of following our cultures especially during marriage? Does it have any significance?
- *Spiritual/Moral*: A woman belongs to the whole community. Marriage is a communal affair. Divorce is against God’s law and community customs.
- Once the participants have expressed themselves and the questions are categorised on the board for all to see, the animator can give the above titles (given in italics) to the groups of statements.

Input

- Meaning is culturally determined and is not absolute.
- According to Pavlov and B.F. Skinner, meaning is a response to stimuli and is learned by a pattern of reinforcement. For these theorists, what the organism does under certain conditions is quite adequate for the determination of “meaning” from a scientific point of view.
- Life is full of statements, opinions, questions.
- But the way different people ask these questions or make statements may depend on their experiences, biases, etc. Yet our statements show the variety of approaches to life, issues, and persons.
- Different people arrive at their levels of meaning and communicate at these levels.
- The statements people make about life disclose the level (depth) at which they encounter it and reflect upon it.

Where is Meaning?

There are at least three theories concerning where meanings exist. The first suggests that meaning is in the external world. That is, things contain their meanings and give them out to those who observe them. Contemporary communicologists however argue that if external phenomena and events contain their own meanings it would be possible for anyone in any society to follow a single set of rules for interpretation and thereby to uncover the same meaning.

The second theory suggests that meaning rests in the symbols (primarily linguistic symbols) in whose terms the reality that we experience is described.

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Materials Required

Paper and Pen



- For this theory, the argument is that there is divergence, sometimes wide divergence, in the way various people interpret the same symbols. There is furthermore, change, sometimes great change from generation to generation in the meanings attached to any given word, phrase or other symbol employed for communication purposes.
- The third theory contends that meanings lie within people, and not in the external world or the symbols in whose terms we describe the world.
- Meaning is therefore a personal thing, internal to persons rather than a part of the world outside. This is the theory ordinarily advocated by contemporary communicologists.

Selective Perception and Self-fulfilling Prophecies

- People tend to selectively perceive messages and to respond to those that are consistent with their self-concepts. This process is sometimes called circularity – believing something, and then looking for evidence from our observations of people and events to support the belief. Another description of the same general idea is self-fulfilling prophecy – that is, predicting that something will happen and then behaving in a manner that causes it to happen.
- What is it that constitutes the depth of meaning and therefore the depth of communication? The depth of presence-to-self. Meanings that involve our personhood (either individually or collectively) are far richer than meanings that pertain to what is exterior (and added) to our persons.
- Meanings that involve our personhood: At the core of the person is the drive to know and the will that grasps every known and willed being and yet thrusts itself forward towards that which fulfils all knowing and willing – the ungraspable Other. (Faith)
- At the core of the person is also the experience of the self as a knowing/willing subject in its drive to the ungraspable Other – an experience that matures and moulds the self along the long and seemingly endless journey to the Other, an experience we call our Search for Identity (e.g.: Experiences of deep love, joy, sorrow that affect our identities).
- At the core of our person is the day-to-day experience of self-expression (communication) and self-possession (growth) in our interaction with other persons (in our quest for the other, search for our identity) who are also on the journey but not necessarily on the same path (social life).
- Meanings are also constituted as the result of a conglomeration of a multiplicity and variety of factors – the existence of which we are not always aware of (examples: time, space, power, culture, religion, tribe, status, etc...)
- Meanings can be ethically right or wrong, beneficial or useless, informative or entertaining, educative or scandalous. The communication is thereby affected.

Review

1. Life is full of statements, opinions and questions which when expressed show the variety of approaches to life, issues and persons that people have.
2. The statements people make about life reflect the level (depth) at which they encounter it and reflect upon it.
3. The depth of presence to self is what constitutes the depth of meaning and therefore the depth of communication.
4. At the core of the person is also the experience of the self as a knowing/willing subject in his drive to the ungraspable other.
5. Meanings are also constituted as the result of a conglomeration of a multiplicity and variety of factors – the existence of which we are not always aware of.
6. Meanings can be ethically right or wrong, beneficial or useless, informative or entertaining, educative or scandalous.

Reflection

What new insight have you gained on the meaning of the word ‘meaning’? Is it true therefore that all meanings given to a particular issue are correct? In what way can we incorporate different meanings to give dimension to issues?

Relevant Skills

Instructor asks the participants to comment on the various reasons that could have triggered the post-election violence in Kenya or any other African country that has experienced violence along tribal lines. He/she then evaluates the different meanings expressed by the participants.

Resources

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

References

Kraft H. Charles. *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*. Tennessee: Abingdon Books, 1991.
 Burton Graeme, Richard Dimbleby. *Teaching Communication*. London: Routledge, 1990.