

“Say what?” Perfecting Communication Skills from “Hi!” to e-mail

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Introduction: Lie of the Mind

“In the way of argument. . . . and friendly communication.”¹

The word “communicate” is like the word “history.” Both are bandied about as if we know what these words actually mean. Yet, both are loaded with layers of meaning. “History” connotes some sort of empirical Truth. The word “history” is of Greek origin, meaning a knowing, learned, wise man or judge² and is defined as “A relation of incidents”³ or “A narrative of past events.”⁴ Recorded history is neither sacred nor static and its meaning shifts over time. In 1593, just slightly over a century after Richard III’s death in 1485, Shakespeare finished his history-biography play Richard III. During the century between Richard III’s death and Shakespeare’s play, several histories of King Richard III were written from which Shakespeare could draw his material. Shakespeare used Thomas More’s History of King Richard the Third for the outline and most of the details of the play but “thanks to Shakespeare’s use of it—and despite modern efforts to salvage Richard’s reputation—it has lasted to this day.”⁵ In actual history, Richard was not a villain. Shakespeare added the gruesomeness to the actual events. Shakespeare creates a character with enough factual references to the real Richard III and a sufficient resemblance to the events surrounding his reign that Shakespeare’s character is the Richard III now cemented in history—thus, the True King Richard III. This is merely one example of how a single word “history” carries both a huge burden and a malleable meaning.

“Communicate,” like “history” carries a heavy burden. “Communicate” connotes that what one party intends to impart is received and understood by the recipient. Hence, a mutual understanding. “Communicate” is defined as “To make known: disclose”⁶ or “To impart (information, knowledge, or the like).”⁷ Communication itself is rife with false assumptions. There are oodles of books and many popular live courses that teach good communication skills. But to arrive at a true mutual understanding remains somewhat elusive. I’m no sociologist or psychologist. But what I know from acting, directing and reading countless plays is that human beings misunderstand one another most of the time. Sophocles would not have had an *Oedipus* were it not for Oedipus’ miscommunication of his parentage. Shakespeare would not have had a *King Lear* if Lear had truly heard the false flattery of his manipulative, and mean, daughters Goneril and Regan. And Sam Shepard’s ineffectual, misguided families composing the motley clan in *A Lie of the Mind* may have actually found their American Dream and wouldn’t have needed three acts to sort through the mayhem of their lives. It’s no wonder we misunderstand one another. The life of the mind is a highly stimulated, intense, 3-D circus, constantly in motion, juggling concrete ideas, happy and sad memories, a myriad of conscious and

subconscious emotions in addition to numerous blasts of inspiration. Plus a whole lot more. Thus, a seemingly simple question can, and is, loaded with all sorts of unintended “baggage.” This is so even if the question is in no way emotionally charged. So, what happens when we up the ante and the question is posed to a co-worker or boss and concerns something you, the speaker, really want but anticipate some variation of a “no” response? Now, even though the stated question may be simple and straightforward as spoken or written, with no apparent foreseeable misunderstanding, the “communication” itself includes the “baggage” and is therefore much more than the mere question posed.

The way I see it, each and every communication is vulnerable to misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and attack. Effective communication is challenging enough when the communication is live, but the opportunity for more misunderstanding increases the more we move away from live, one-one-one communication—from the phone to the lean, stripped down e-mail. In fact, a recent article in Britain’s *Daily Star* reported “42 e-mail blunders a minute.”⁸ 2-D was never more complicated. So, how do we save ourselves and make a virtue of e-mail communication?

Fundamentals of Live Communication

If we understand some fundamental elements of live communication and apply them to our work in the electronic age, perfecting daily communication skills is simplified and successful. All communication has a semiological and phenomenological component. The semiologic component can be described as how meaning is made through social signs and codes. The phenomenological component is the visceral, emotive, response human beings experience to a person or event. This can also be described as “phenomenal in the sense of pertaining to phenomena or to our sensory experience with empirical objects.”⁹ More particularly: “Phenomenology [is] a type of descriptive psychology, in contrast to an empirical psychology and its causal mode of explanation. Phenomenology is an attempt to explain the mind’s representations of phenomena. Phenomenologists claim that the ‘intentionality’ of human consciousness colors these representations. Intentionality is posited as an activity of human consciousness through which objects derive meaning. This ‘activity’ is instantaneous and nonreflective. In language, consciousness determines the meaning of words; in perception it determines the patterns and meanings of what we see.”¹⁰ Simply put, phenomenology is that instantaneous, visceral response an individual has to a thing, person or event. For example, a baby crying or running water, or a siren. When you enter the room, it is possible that some other individual in the room may experience a phenomenal response to you if you remind them of someone they know, someone that individual has either a strong negative or positive feeling about. On the page—whether a hard copy or electronic version—a strong argument can be made that an individual may experience a phenomenologic response to the use of specific language or typographical errors. These are just examples of what might trigger a phenomenologic response but you can envision the limitless possibilities.

Semiotics or semiology is the language of signs and is, briefly put, how meaning is made. The most common brief definition of semiotics is “the study of signs” (or “the theory of signs”).¹¹ It involves the study not only of what we refer to as “signs” in everyday speech, but of

anything which "stands for" something else. In a semiotic sense, signs include words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Such signs are studied not in isolation but as part of semiotic "sign systems" (such as medium or genre). Put more simply, semioticians study how meanings are made: they are concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. This is significant because all verbal and nonverbal communication creates meaning that consciously, subconsciously and unconsciously communicates information to your audience.

Virtually every "how to" guide for effective communication talks about listening: effective listening. Listening is not as easy as one might believe. One reason that listening is so difficult is that speakers are so slow. Most people can listen at about 450 words per minute, but can speak at only about 175 words per minute. Therefore, listeners have a lot of extra time when they are listening—time during which they can evaluate what the other person just said, prepare their next response, or wander away from the interaction completely. Is it possible to translate active one-on-one live listening skills to e-mail communications? I believe it is. The principles to hone effective listening skills can translate to e-mail communication. If you consider the e-mail you receive (or as received by another) as the beginning of a script, like a play script, you can imagine you are "hearing" what the other person is saying as you read the e-mail.

Further complicating the differences between live communication and e-mail communication is that at least 80% of communication is non-verbal. Does this evaporate in e-mail or are there non-verbal expressions embedded in an e-mail communication? What happens to these intuitive and significant live communication elements in e-mail? Can they be preserved? One scholar claims that "reading presents almost no phenomenal distraction."¹² I disagree with that statement. Does it even matter that we are aware of the elements of live communication? I believe it does matter. Knowledge of the elements themselves at the least can give you an appreciation for the complexity of communication. At best, you might just be inspired to sharpen all of your communications—live and electronic. As an information specialist, our job is to share the results of our research. When we present the results live, with all of the underlying elements of communication working for us, we have a better opportunity to "read" the response of our audience. Further, there is an instantaneous observation of how the research results are received as well as an opportunity for a live explanation and questions.

We all have moments when it is rather nice to hide behind the conceit of faceless e-mail communication rather than face our audience one-on-one. We relish the anonymity of the two-dimensional computer screen as we send the research results. We delight in taking the time to read the recipient's response and revel in the luxury of drafting that ghostwriter-like response that can be shot through cyberspace from anywhere on the planet. Thus, if we are to communicate electronically, how can we do so effectively?

Communicative Intent

The single most important factor in e-mail communication is intent. Be sure that you communicate what you intend to communicate. "Simple," you say. "I certainly do not need to read an article or attend a conference to learn this obvious information." How often have you sent an e-mail that resulted in numerous back-and-forth e-mails to clarify a point you believed

you made very clearly? Have you ever been the unwitting victim of someone else forwarding your original e-mail to other recipients when you had no idea this would take place? And, it goes without saying, that you would have written a different original e-mail had you known? Have you ever heard of an instance when an individual or company accidentally hit “reply to all?”

By adopting the chief best practice in e-mail composition—to slow down—writing an e-mail that expresses what you truly intend to communicate will be a success. Already you are thinking that the author of this paper hasn’t got a clue. Doesn’t she know that you work in the madcap corporate world or in a University Library with student urchins clamoring about and asking incessant questions? Doesn’t she realize that I do not have time to slow down and compose a poetical e-mail? In fact, I do realize it. I am it! But I also believe that if you have knowledge of an alternative process for writing e-mail that is aware of all that communication is, you will avoid the common pitfalls and master effective electronic communication.

A recent Google search of “e-mail communication” yielded over 500 hits describing best practices, things to avoid and scholars touting what can only be described as good, common sense lists. You all know what not to do. You all know what *to* do. But is there a way to imbue the 2-D communication with the richness of the elements of live communication? True, you are not writing the Great American Novel or a Pulitzer prize-winning play, but wouldn’t it be great if every e-mail were composed with that depth of commitment? Perhaps this passage will help you slow down and work on the process of composition:

“Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, ‘Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.’”¹³

Intent in the composition of the e-mail includes specific factors such as identifying your audience, assuming your e-mail may be forwarded, and paying attention to the method of composition of the e-mail. I believe that when you identify your audience, it is beneficial, not to mention insanely humane, to remember that life is short and fragile and dear. No one, and I mean *absolutely* no one, relishes receiving an unpleasant e-mail. Be kind to your audience even when you really and truly want to be unpleasant or even mean. Just don’t do it. Consider if you would entertain the same communication live with that very high percentage of non-verbal communication buttressed by social signs swirling about (semiotic component) amidst the instantaneous and nonreflective activity (phenomenologic component)? As you see, the live communication is riddled with an infinite number of factors beyond your control. With an electronic communication, once you press “send,” you’ve lost all control—period. It’s even worse than a paper letter getting into the wrong person’s hand. Much, much worse.

Cyberspace is your enemy. You, the 3-D person with your individual “life of the mind” have voluntarily relinquished control of an e-mail—we’ll call “nasty” for purposes of this discussion—that will be received, read, digested, and fully experienced by that other 3-D person with their own “life of the mind.” Assuming the recipient is not visible to you, you have neither the benefit of observing their physical reaction to the nasty e-mail, nor the live experience in real-time of their response. One of the nice things about e-mail that is not generally available to you in a one-on-one context or on the phone, the discretion of when to respond to the e-mail, probably works against you after you’ve sent the nasty e-mail. The notion that one can hide behind the e-mail in its seemingly faceless 2-D format is merely an illusion. The itty-bitty communication in Century Schoolbook font may be a 2-D quip rattling around in cyberspace but it is sandwiched between two live human beings each of whom invariably continue to possess all of the wonderful and tragic elements that make them human. And, the semiotic and phenomenologic components of communication remain alive and well despite the seemingly non-human e-mail communication.

This is precisely where the heart of the riddle comes in. When you are engaged in live communication, you participate in the other person’s experience to your words, gestures, tone and overall presence. It is not dissimilar to being in the audience of a play. Something happens in that live venue between you the spectator and the actors on stage. That “something” I’ve never quite been able to reduce to language as it is experiential, being in the moment, seeing an event on stage and reacting to it in an unplanned, organic, authentic manner either solo or in concert with other audience members. A similar experience cannot be duplicated in a movie theater. In the case of our nasty e-mail sandwiched between two live human beings, the sender and the recipient are each still individually having a live experience surrounding the e-mail communication. This is why it is so important to compose your e-mail carefully. If the e-mail is composed with care, it is possible to bridge a portion of the electronic communication gap and move closer toward live communication.

You might argue that the quest to “move closer to live communication” would suggest a more casual, conversational tone in your e-mail composition. I argue against such a conclusion. The reason is that when you are speaking live to another person, based on the non-verbal and verbal feedback you experience, you intuitively adjust the content of your communication as well as your tone, eye contact, posture, pose, gestures and physical movement. Your one e-mail needs to be composed to achieve the most accurate effect because you do not have the luxury to make all of the adjustments you would in a live communication. As such, I strongly suggest that when composing the text of the e-mail, err on the side of a formal composition rather than something in the chatty, informal range of instant messaging. Embracing the idea of a formal e-mail composition requires you to write in complete sentences, use a broad and rich vocabulary, strive toward the correct tone, and, in a cinematic sense, think of underscoring to create a mood. The creation of tone and mood must be achieved with the use of language rather than the typographical tools of e-mail. Avoid the handy traps of using all capital letters to express approval or disappointment. Assuming your e-mail might be forward to people who were not identified as your original audience, think of your original e-mail as the beginning of a script. How would you want to be “heard” if your e-mail was read aloud? To that end, some very practical pointers from professionals for e-mail composition are:

1. Do not write anything that you would not feel entirely comfortable being read aloud in a court of law.

2. Do not write anything that your Granny would be uncomfortable with or might blush if she read your e-mail aloud—you might not think there are real consequences to such an e-mail. Recently, an attorney accidentally—or at least that is the argument—hit “reply to all” for an e-mail any granny would certainly blush at if read aloud. Not only did the e-mail use foul language—very foul language—but it also included racial slurs, and, to top it all off, laid out confidential information and trial strategy based on that confidential information. In addition to the real legal problem of inadvertent e-mail disclosure of information otherwise protected by the attorney-client privilege, it also raised serious ethical questions, not the least of which was potential sanctions for the attorney if not worse consequences.

3. If at all possible, take the time to print out the e-mail and review it for content accuracy, spelling and grammatical errors and tone.

4. Wait. Depending on the importance of the response you are composing, wait to send the response until you are truly ready. Wait an hour or a day if possible.

5. If you are the recipient of an e-mail, employ active listening techniques by fully reading and digesting the e-mail text. In one-on-one live communication, while we are listening to what the other person is saying, we are generally only partially engaged in what they are saying. What is occupying most of our mental energy is thinking of our response well in advance of the end of the speakers comments. We do the same with e-mail dialogs. Rather than anticipate what the writer is saying, slow down and read and contemplate the text before you respond. Try to set your own agenda aside and “listen” to what the other person has to say.

Or, if you are at a total loss on how to effectively communicate by e-mail, in December, 2005, the Information Mapping launched an e-learning program entitled “Making E-mail Work.”¹⁴

Conclusion: Then Again, I Could Have it all Wrong

I recently attended a continuing legal education class on Blogging and the Law. My firm belief that live, in the flesh, human-to-human communication is the most vital, nuanced and rich form of communication was challenged. More than two speakers waxed ecstatic about the “human face” of blogs. The “realness” and “liveness” of the digital voice through blogs. I always thought of “realness,” “liveness,” “authenticity,” and “honesty” within the rarified live theatrical experience where we reveled in the suspension of disbelief and concluded with catharsis—that unique purifying release of emotions and tension. But now I was being told that a corporate founder’s blog was lauded because of its “realness.”

If a blog can, and is, considered “live” and “real,” maybe the argument to try and compose an e-mail with an aim toward refined live communication falls flat. Maybe I should be working on my blog rather than writing this paper. My problem is that I do not have a blog and I

believe that rather than let our language and composition skills fade, we need to continue to improve them to establish a trustworthy digital voice as technological advancements demand. As information specialists, our credibility itself rests in clear communication. Whether in person, by phone or via e-mail, a communication free of doubt or confusion bolsters our fine work. Let us then celebrate our tradition of excellence and transform—with irresistible glee—as we master the art of electronic communication.

“This paper is the history of my knowledge. . .”¹⁵

Endnotes

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Henry V. The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.

² *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed. (1989). Available at: <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Webster's II New College Dictionary*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

⁵ Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*. New York: Wings Books, 1970.

⁶ *Webster's II New College Dictionary*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed. (1989). Available at: <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

⁸ Burchell, Iain, *Daily Star*, April 7, 2006.

⁹ States, Bert. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

¹⁰ Hermann, Donald H.J. “Phenomenology, Structuralism, Hermeneutics, and Legal Study: Applications of Contemporary Continental Thought to Legal Phenomena.” 36 U. Miami L. Rev. 379 (1982).

¹¹ Clark, D.S. Jr. *Principles of Semiotic*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989.

¹² Ibid, 28.

¹³ Lamont, Anne. *Bird by Bird*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

¹⁴ “Information Mapping Launches e-Learning Program to Teach E-mail Writing Skills.”
Business Wire, Dec. 15, 2005.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, William. *Cymbeline.. The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.