2.2: Defining Communication

As instructors look out over their classes, we receive varying verbal and nonverbal messages from our students. Some students send the message that the course material stimulates them, while others indicate they are disinterested, confused, curious, or bored. Actually, every student in class is sending a message whether they mean to send them or not. But the instructor can easily misinterpret this communication. The student who looks interested could actually be faking it to get the instructor to like him.

This situation illustrates two key aspects of communication:

- **It is impossible not to communicate**
- **Perfect Communication is impossible**

It is impossible not to communicate. We are constantly sending “messages” to those around us. These messages may be intentional or unintentional. Our hair style, the car we drive, involuntary facial expressions, even actions like showing up late to a meeting are all examples of communication messages. In a face-to-face class I would have a student stand up in front of the class and attempt not to communicate with the class. After about 5 seconds I would ask the class if they received any messages. I would then hear answers like, “He was nervous” or “He was trying to ignore us.” The student couldn’t help but send a message whether intentional or not.

**Perfect communication is impossible.** The more significant the differences are between communicators, the greater the potential for miscommunication. This difference could be anything from their age, to their gender, their culture, education, religion, and many more. When my wife and I first started dating those many years ago, we had many differences of experiences. Now that we have been together for over 40 years and have had many common experiences, our communication is more effective. We can finish each other’s sentences. We understand each other much better, but our communication is still not perfect.
So, remember, perfect communication is impossible. Richard Workman writes in his book, Information Anxiety (Wurman, 2000),

“We are limited by a language where words may mean one thing to one person and quite something else to another. There is no ordained right way to communicate. At least in the absolute sense, it is impossible to share our thoughts with someone else, for they will not be understood in exactly the same way.” ¹

Communication expert Joseph DeVito further explains this communication challenge, when he states:

“Communication occurs when one person (or more), sends and receives messages that are distorted by noise, occur within a context, have some effect, and provide some opportunity for feedback.”² (DeVito, 2018)

Reference

2. DeVito, Joseph. Human Communication: the basic course. Pearson, 2018