

Communication Theories and Instructional Practice: A Limited-Effects Perspective*

Amare Asgedom**

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1. Communication Theories

Conventional Communication theories (Burke, 1945; Lasswell, 1948, Shannon and Weaver 1949; Schramm, etc.), have always defined communication as "acts of transmission" of information, ideas, attitudes, etc. They formulated models that reveal a linear-flow process. The audience were assumed to receive communication messages provided that a high-fidelity source encodes these messages.

For many decades, the "Hypodermic-Bullet-Effect" theory dominated the theorization of communication. The audience were considered an easy target of the bullet (high fidelity messages). Communications are to have high effects on their audience.

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Under such assumption the major concern became the creation of high fidelity sources and high fidelity messages in order to gear communications to target audiences.

But later studies (e.g. Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Klapper 1960 etc.) found the audience of communications as having resistance to the bullet. Their findings suggested the theory of "Minimal Communication Effects". Complex and multiple variables have been found to mediate such effects, they argued. Riley & Riley (1951) for instance, pointed out the importance of the social milieu in communication. Friere (1972) stressed the need for democratization of the communication act. One-way communication results in "domination" and has the effect of suppressing creativity, Friere argued.

In his famous and controversial book, "*The Medium is the Message*", McLuhan (1965) strongly supported the idea that communication contents have little effect on their audience. It is rather the medium and not the content of communication affecting the mode of perception of the audience that has far reaching impact on the audience.

Klapper's (1960) "Minimum Effect Theory" of communication based itself primarily on recognition of audience "powers" in determining communication effects. Such audience "powers" arise out of the active functioning of what are termed as "Selective Processes" – selective exposure (or selective attention), selective retention.

Selective exposure (or selective attention) is the tendency of people to expose themselves to communications in accord with their existing interests, wants, needs, opinions etc., and to avoid unsympathetic material. The notion of selective exposure follows nicely from Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, which suggests that one way to reduce dissonance after making a decision is to seek out information that is consonant with the decision (Severin and Tankard, 1982; 136). For instance, a media campaign designed to increase information about the UN and improve attitudes toward it was found by Star and Hughes (1950) to have been most widely attended by persons whose interest in and opinion of the organization were high to begin with. Cannell and MacDonald (1956) discovered that articles on health, including those dealing with the possible relationship between smoking and cancer, were consistently read by 60 percent of the non-smoking males among a probability sample of Ann Arbor

adults, but by only 32 percent of the male smokers, to whom the material presented more of a threat. Schramm and Carter (1959) also found that Republicans were about twice as likely as were Democrats to have watched a Republican sponsored campaign telecast.

Selective perception – is the tendency to interpret communication messages on the criteria of interests, individual experiences, moods, purposes, etc. Laboratory experiments have established that perception of moving lights, relative size of coins, relative length of lines, and the like is in part or whole determined by what persons want to perceive, have habitually perceived, or expect some form of social or physical reward for perceiving (Asch, 1952). Cannell and MacDonald (1956) asked 228 adult residents of Ann Arbor, Michigan whether newspaper and magazine reports had convinced them that smoking was a cause of cancer. The relationship was perceived by 54 percent of the non-smokers, but by only 28 percent of the smokers for whom it presumably constituted a considerable threat.

Selective Retention is the tendency for recall of information to be influenced by wants, needs, attitudes and other psychological factors. Many conclusive studies (Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947; Sealeman, 1941; Zimmerman and Bauer, 1956, etc.) have demonstrated audience selectivity in retention. For instance, Levine and Murphy (1948) presented both a pro-communist prose passage and an anti-Communist prose passage to five pro-communist college students and five anti-communist college students. A few minutes after each presentation, the subjects were asked to reproduce the passage as accurately as possible and the whole procedure was repeated “at weekly intervals for five weeks, memory of the selection was tested without submitting the paragraph to the subjects (Levine and Murphy, 1948; 510). The pro-Soviet group consistently recalled more of the pro-Soviet material than did the anti-communist group and the gap between them increased overtime. During the five weeks of “forgetting”, the anti-Communist group forgot the pro-Soviet material faster than the pro-Soviet group, and the gap again increased overtime.

The studies on selective exposure or attention, selective perception and selective retention typically indicate that one or more of these processes occur among stipulated percentage of the group but do not mean all the processes occur among all people in all communications (Klapper, 1960).

2. Instructional Practice

The adoption of a communicative perspective to instructional practice leads to a major shift of emphasis in the instructional process, the "learner-centred approach". In the review of communication literature cited above, audience-centred communications have been suggested as more effective than communications that are source-centred or message-centred. The audience have been discovered as having more "power" in determining the effects communications will have on them.

There was still some literature that advocated the communicative approach to instructional practice (Friere, 1972; Knowles, 1973, 1975, 1980; Rogers, 1951, etc.). In his book, **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**, Friere (1972) confirmed the need for two-way (or multi-directional flow) communication system by coining the term **dialogue** in education and strongly argued against the dominant educational system, --- in which only the teacher played an active role and the students kept in roles of passive receptions, "vessels to be filled in" with the "teaching package" of an educational planner (or class-room teacher). He advocated a reversal from Pedagogy of the oppressors to the Pedagogy of the oppressed.

In the same vein, Knowles (1980), an adult educator and an advocate of the model, "Andragogy" (the art and science of helping adults learn) wrote against the dominant model, pedagogy (the art and science of teaching children). He asserted that the pedagogic model still remains the most dominant one from which educators derive their assumptions about learning and the characteristics of learners and on which they base their curricula and teaching practices (1980:40).

Knowles (1980:40) disclosed that pedagogy evolved in the monastic schools of Europe and began to dominate the secular schools and universities of Europe. The term pedagogy, he argued, was derived from the Greek words "paid" (meaning "child") and "agogus" (meaning "leading"). So, pedagogy, according to Knowles means literally, the art and science of teaching children. "The pedagogical assumptions about learning and learner were based initially on observations by the monks in teaching very young children relatively simple skills - mostly reading and writing, knowles argued (1980:40). The continuity of dominance of the model was reinforced by research emphasis to reactions of children and animals to didactic teaching. Research on learning, however, was

insufficient and is only a recent phenomenon. But learners, were found to be resistant frequently to the strategy that pedagogy prescribed including fact-laden lectures, assigned readings, drill, quizzes, rote memorizing and examinations (1980: 40).

To Knowles (1980), the model of "Andragogy" which was developed in the area of Adult Education and which has different assumptions (from Pedagogy) was thought to approximate the learner-centered approach to education. The learner-centred approach is characterized by the fact that the learner is responsible for her/his learning, that the role of the teacher or trainer is shifted from a controller to a facilitator, that the nature of the learning process as a whole is more individualistic and collaborative whereby the learning objectives, contents, methods and evaluation processes are not determined by one person but are negotiated by all (knowles, 1980; Hailu, 1989:8). It is also believed that "no one can really teach anyone else anything, in the sense of implanting knowledge or skills in a passive student" (Dyer, 1980:81). Rogers (1951) recommended the client-centred therapeutic techniques, the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and respect to be applied to education.

There are some similar studies in Ethiopia (Mekonen 1987; Hailom, 1986; Gebremedhin, 1986; Ambaye, 1989, etc.) that directly or indirectly suggest the importance of non-pedagogical approaches to education. However, practice still remains anomalous to theory. It can be argued that in most of the countries of the world until now the teacher's main source of satisfaction has been through the control of children, through the opportunity to perform in front of a captive audience with effective techniques (Lipson, 1973:8).

Pearce (1973: 72-75) has drawn a comprehensive picture of how the traditionally derived teacher-taught relationship still prevailed as the predominant instructional strategy in the vast majority of schools. From the premise of the impact of school environments on curriculum and methods, Pearce demonstrated how the teacher-centred approach could be seen in the very "lay-out" of the typical classroom.

She has observed how the physical arrangement of class-room furniture limits social interaction and physical movement. Students see other students' backs and any attempt at spontaneous interaction during instruction is discouraged or forbidden by the teacher. "Social development is completely dissociated from

intellectual and cognitive development," Pearce argued (1973:72). Because the system generates too much boredom (unless the performing teacher is entertaining which rarely happens) students must develop an amazingly high "tolerance for boredom" in order to survive in the system. Some manage to "tune out" while remaining physically present with marginal "tuning in" enabling them to get passing grades. Others who can manage this, fail repeatedly, Pearce added (1972:72).

3. Easy Assumptions Instructors need to be Aware of

More research is needed to investigate the nature of the teaching-learning process in the Ethiopian educational institutions. It could, however, be easily hypothesized that the teacher-centred technique would predominate in most cases as the country is a Low Support Environment (Darge, 1988: 33). One could also speculate (although this has to be confirmed through systematic investigation) a possible student exposures to the new perspectives in a teacher training program. The discrepancy could, however, be explained partly by the conflict between what prospective teachers are "**told to do**" and by what their "**instructors actually do.**"

In theory, an instructor may advocate a two-way communication, in practice, he/she may limit it. In fact, there are arguments that support the idea that students imitate more of what they "see" than that of what they "hear" and "read". They "imitate the actions" of their instructors and exercise selectivity on what their instructors "tell" them to do.

There is a paucity of data (at systematized investigation level) in showing the factors that reinforced continuity of the dominant paradigm in the Ethiopian educational system. Common sense could, however, suggest curriculum (quantity and quality), student-teacher ratio, time and space limitations, student-teacher attitude, authoritarian culture, etc. as some of the major obstacles. Most of such barriers are beyond the control of the instructor. Solutions are to be sought collectively both by the society and the educational institutions.

4. Conclusions

There are, however, certain assumptions secondary school instructors should realize and could make control of them; These are:

- 4.1. **Moulding** - Most secondary school students are not children or clay that can be moulded into shapes the school wants to. They are people with desires, preferences, predisposition, habits, powers, experiences, etc. They are not also fully matured adults who need a complete independence to be fully treated by "Andragogic" techniques. Perhaps, we could consider the right point in the continuum between the polar opposites, pedagogy and andragogy to be applied as a realistic approach, depending on the nature of the subject matter and experience (age) of students. An analysis is, therefore, needed to develop the right mix for the right age levels.
- 4.2. **Competition from other Sources**- The school has no monopoly on communication. At present, we can witness a proliferation of entertainment communications in the form of films, theater, video and television. They can easily rob the mind of youngsters and the school may be left with only the body of these youngsters. To face the fierce competition, David Alan Gilman, Professor of Education at the Indiana University recommends **quick and dirty tricks of commercial television** to be adopted by class-room instructors (Gilman, 1973:105) – in order to cope up with the requirements of televised generation. Failing in these competition could have the effect of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, student-readiness for learning would deteriorate, on the other hand, students could experience a declining habit of AIME – Amount of Invested Mental Effort – in processing a material to be learned. It is argued that learning is highly dependent on AIME an individual makes in processing information (Solomon and Leigh, 1984). The application of high-or-low AIME in processing a material is the result of a habit (Dyer, 1981). Processing of film, video, television communications does not require high-AIME (Mander, 1987). It can, therefore, be argued that more exposure to entertainment communications could create the application of a low-AIME habit in attempting to learn even materials that require high AIME.
- 4.3. **Existence of Varied Experiences** - We all learn from our own experiences and from the experiences of others. "Reading a book on cookery does not by

itself qualify to be a cook, nor does a lecture on a football game enable some one to be a foot-ball player, unless he learns the art in the actual field" (Hailu, 1989:8). Dale (1969) one of the pioneers in creating taxonomy of human experiences, categorized the means of our learning into three: "learning by doing": learning by observation" and "learning by reading - or listening". Simple observation would, however, tell that minimum use is made of the former (doing) in the Ethiopian context. In his advocacy of "Process Education", Cole (1973:65) underlines the importance of "doing" in the development of skills - probably those that rank high in the scale of transferability of learning. Most skills are attainable through actual participation in the real activity. Dyer (1980, p. 156) confirmed the importance of the experience of "doing" by saying that "the greatest intellectuals have been those who learned primarily by doing".

5. Job Description of Teacher

The teacher alone can not bring about drastic changes to redress all educational problems. She/he can, however, do a part to alleviate some of them. To this effect, Lipson (1973; 7) has summarized below some of the abilities which a teacher must have:

1. The teacher should be an intellectual model for students.
2. The teacher should have attitudes, opinions and emotions which help rather than inhibit, the student learning.
3. The teacher should be able to employ varied system of allocating resources.
4. The teacher should be selective knowledge-source both of knowledge regarding instructional strategies and information of direct use to the student. She/he should be able to create information "uncertainty" in students which could lead to student-information-seeking activity. The teacher should also help students in learning how to learn.
5. The teacher must be able to collect, organize and interpret data, using the data as basis for decision-making.
6. The teacher should be able to plan an educational program which will assess students career development.

There are undoubtedly additions which should be made to the list, and better ways to classify the skills and abilities which teachers should have. At its best,

the list represents topics for discussion to change the pedagogic techniques of teaching which have often been more of a liability than an asset in the process of learning.

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