Chapter 1

Communication theory and   
professional practice

Chapter outline

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Case studies and comments

Case study 1.1 - Communication ethics in the professions

Below are extracts from a *Sydney Morning Herald* article titled ‘Self-interest

detracts from lustre of theprofessions’ and written by Simon Longstaff, executive director of the St James Ethics Centre, Sydney.

*the professions are consistently understood as being made up of people   
who act in a spirit of public service. That is, professionals are supposed to   
put the interests of the community before self-interest or that of their   
professional colleagues … society has agreed to enter into a kind of social   
compact where it allows professionals certain privileges. These include: the   
right to carry out certain work forbidden to others, the right to engage in   
self-regulation, and so on. Far too often has society been left with no   
alternative but to conclude that its trust has been abused … there are   
medical practitioners who have failed to respect the autonomy of their   
patients, lawyers who have failed to distinguish between the client’s   
interests and wants, and accountants who have operated as ‘guns for hire’   
on the basis that if they don’t do the job, then somebody else will. Engineers   
have sanctioned the application of sub-standard specifications, architects   
have allowed the public spaces to be polluted and journalists have ignored   
the truth in favour of a ‘good story’. It must surely be time for a deeper   
debate about the purpose of the professions in society; a time to call the   
professions to account and give them an opportunity to re-commit to the   
social compact. It is also a time for them to make serious suggestions about   
ways in which the community’s trust can justifiably be restored.*

Source: S. Longstaff (1994), ‘Self-interest detracts from lustre of theprofessions’, *The   
 Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April, p. 17.

Discussion

Organise a class discussion of the ethical obligations of professional

communication. Refer to the points made in the case study as well as the six-point code listed in the ‘Communication code of ethics’ section of the chapter. Here are a few possible discussion starters:

• What obligations do professionals in your field have to their profession,   
 their employers, their colleagues, their clients and society as a whole?

• Should their primary obligation be to their organisation and its   
 shareholders in the case of a public company?

• What does Simon Longstaff mean when he talks about ‘the social

compact’?

• Do professionals guard their ‘secrets’ from the public? If so, why and how?

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• What are some of the effects of unclear communication on both the   
 profession itself and the people who are its clients?

Identify, if appropriate, cases of unethical behaviour among professionals that you have experienced or may have read about. After you have discussed this case   
study, turn to our comments on it.

Comments

Ethical considerations are basic to communication generally and to professional

communication at all times. In this case study, we are interested in your experience   
and insights and perhaps some of the ethical dilemmas you have faced. Many   
ethicists, like Dr Simon Longstaff, believe that professionals should act not only in   
the interests of their own organisations and its shareholders, but also in the   
interests of the greater community, and this is what he means by the ‘social   
compact’. In later chapters of the text, we consider ethics in terms of language,   
research techniques, letter and report writing, intercultural communication   
competence and mediated communication. So without laying down strict ethical   
advice, we might consider ethics to be a subtext of all we say or don’t say, be it in   
negotiations, persuasive speeches such as sales pitches, or written workplace   
documents, submissions and promotions.

Case study 1.2 - Purposeful communication

A ward supervisor at a hospital wishes to prevent time-wasting at morning tea breaks. She tries out a number of noticeboard messages and asks you to pick the one most likely to produce worker cooperation. The messages are:

1. Nursing staff are asked to respect the morning tea privilege. Ward sisters to   
 note.

2. Morning tea is taking too long. Staff late back to work will lose this   
 privilege.

3. Boys and girls, we know you like to chinwag at morning tea break, but give   
 *us* a break and cut *yours* down to the allocated 15 minutes provided.

4. A short respite from the morning’s nursing duties is provided between

10.30 and 10.45 a.m. Staff are inclined, however, to presume on the   
hospital’s generosity in the granting of this privilege, with the result that   
many do not resume normal duties for up to half an hour after the

commencement of the break. Patients may be inconvenienced as a result. It   
is desired that staff take cognisance of the need to cooperate in this regard.

5. Staff are asked to limit their morning tea break to the 15 minutes provided   
 between 10.30 and 10.45 a.m.

Discussion

Comment on the ‘purposefulness’ of each message and pick the best one. Discuss   
how staff might respond to each of the messages. If you wish, write a better one   
yourself. After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

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Comments

If the purpose of the notice is to get support and conformity, then (1) is too

impersonal and formal, and lacks specific information; (2) is too threatening and   
also fails to gives exact times for the break; (3) is patronising and cloying; and (4) is   
longwinded and pompous. We think (5) is preferable; it is easily read and   
understood and gives exact times. Does the group agree? Is your choice better   
than any of the others?

Case study 1.3 - Structuring the message

Bill Snedden, the sales manager, tended to ‘overcommunicate’. So when   
Sheila Oates, one of his reps, got the following mobile phone message from Bill,   
she didn’t listen carefully or take notes, thinking it was just general chat and didn’t   
apply to her. Unfortunately, the message was erased before she could ring back.   
The message said: ‘Sheila, I asked Liam and Ali to go on that assignment next   
Wednesday and to report at 9.30 at the Cole Bay branch of Westpac, 15 Firth   
Street. Liam and Ali are the two new programmers I appointed last week, by the   
way. What I wanted to ask you was to go along too and show them the new IT   
procedures’.

Discussion

Examine the six aspects of purposefulness listed in the ‘Purpose in communicating’ section and explain why Sheila had to telephone her boss that evening. After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

Comments

Bill Snedden’s phone message is poorly constructed. Sheila hears no relevance to herself until the end, by which time she has forgotten the instructions and has accidentally deleted the message. Bill should probably have begun with a request to her to go with the new staff. If Bill had initially focused on what he wanted Sheila to do, she would have listened more carefully to the detail.

Case study 1.4 - Identifying ‘noise’ in written communication

Here are some passages of text that we have extracted from recent publications.   
Each one has an example of a form of ‘noise’ that we have described. Read them   
through and classify each as mechanical, semantic or psychological. Make sure you   
can explain your choice. After you have discussed this case study, turn to our   
comments on it.

1. You will hear from us as soon as we have investigated your claims.

2. The estate will be divided equally between his brother and his wife’s three   
 sisters.

3. We trust that in future you will not fall behind in your instalments.

4. Peter did not trust the surgeon after he broke both his hands.

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5. Ku-Ring-Gai council has broken new ground by organising a symposium on   
 urban bushland management for Saturday evening (11 October). It is the   
 first time a council has arranged a symposium to discuss thoroughly its   
 bushland reserves.

6. We need to achieve conceptual communication criteria with a view to   
 bringing about a dynamic parameters analysis. Overall capabilities   
 implementation is compatible with the modular facilities interface.

Comments

We would classify the sentences as follows:

1. Psychological noise: The tone could be regarded as blunt and offensive. Use   
 of the word ‘investigated’ creates an overtone of distrust.

2. Semantic noise: This sentence is ambiguous. Does his brother receive 50   
 per cent or 25 per cent of the estate?

3. Psychological noise: Again, the tone is threatening and accusing. The use of   
 the phrase ‘We trust that in future …’ is patronising.

4. Semantic noise: Again, this sentence is ambiguous. Whose hands were

broken - the surgeon’s or Peter’s? Or did the surgeon break both of Peter’s   
hands?

5. Mechanical and psychological noise: Poorly and inconsistently spelt

documents may convey a lack of expertise or a lack of care or

professionalism. If someone cannot spell, do they really know the subject?   
Media releases like these are the public face of an organisation. Poor   
attention to technical detail not only makes the text harder to understand   
but also may adversely impact on the perception readers have of the   
organisation.

6. Semantic noise: This kind of jargon often appears in business and policy   
 writing, often because the writer wants to impress the reader with their   
 expertise or their status. The message usually turns out to be meaningless   
 or an inflated version of what the writer is communicating.

Case study 1.5 - Supermarket sales tactics cleverly use the way our brains perceive and process sensory   
information

Ever wonder why you always seem to spend more than you intend when you do the weekly food shopping? Consumer research shows how supermarkets cleverly use their knowledge of psychology and the way our brains deal with a mass of sensory information to influence our spending habits.

The points below have been adapted from a guide published by the Australian Consumers Association publication *Choice*:

• Sensory delights: It’s very common for a supermarket to locate the   
 attractive fresh produce or the bakery at its entry. Does the deli section

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with its medley of colours and tasty offerings then follow? The sights and   
smells create a market-type atmosphere that aims to put you in the mood   
as you’re led through the labyrinth to the less interesting packaged dry   
goods and strategically placed impulse-buy items. Smell is a powerful sense,   
with links to memory, and freshly baked goods and fresh produce conjure   
positive associations. Fresh food also looks best in natural light, hence the   
positioning near the front entrance.

• In your face: More-expensive items with higher profit margins tend to be   
 right in the line of sight of the target customer, as shoppers are considered   
 ‘lazy’ and will see those first. Cheaper or supermarket brands tend to be   
 located on the higher or lower shelves. Manufacturers pay more for the   
 eye-level space on the shelves.

• Where are the eggs? Probably nowhere near the milk or bread. Separation   
 of popular staples is a common element of supermarket design. Why? So   
 you’ll spend more time in-store negotiating your way past all those flashy   
 and tempting impulse-buy items.

• This goes with that: Positioning natural combinations like chips with dips or   
 biscuits near coffee or tea may be logical, but is it any wonder that it   
 increases the sales of both? Items that are positioned in close proximity are   
 perceived as being related.

• Research shows that grocery shoppers are heavily influenced by in-store   
 displays, particularly those at the end of aisles in the ‘bargain bin’. Are they   
 really discounted?

• Colours invoke our emotions and can encourage us to spend more money.   
 Red is used because it stands out above all other colours. It also causes our   
 adrenaline to start and makes the heart beat faster. Blue is used as a trust   
 symbol and green invokes freshness.

• Size and shape do matter. If a manufacturer wants its brand to stand out   
 from its competitors’ brands, it will use either larger packaging or a   
 different-shaped bottle to catch the shopper’s attention among the mass of   
 colours and shapes on the shelves. Generic or supermarket brands are   
 often similar in appearance, size, shape and package design to the leading   
 brands, to make it harder for shoppers to distinguish them.

• A study published by the American Psychological Association showed that   
 even the choice of in-store music influenced shoppers’ wine selection. Over   
 a two-week period in an English supermarket, either French or German   
 music was played at a display of wines from these countries. When the   
 music was French, sales of French wine increased; when it was German,   
 sales of German wine increased. When questioned, shoppers seemed   
 unaware of the effect the music had on their wine purchasing. Source:

Choice (2009), ‘Supermarket sales tactics’, 5 January,

[http://www.choice.com.au/reviews-and-tests/food-and-health/food-and-](http://www.choice.com.au/reviews-and-tests/food-and-health/food-and-/)  
drink/supermarkets/supermarket-sales-tactics.aspx

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Discussion

What characteristics of the way that we perceive information from the

environment are these display tactics exploiting? Can you think of other clever   
ploys that shops use to appeal to your senses and get you in the mood for   
shopping? After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

Comments

The human brain experiences the outside world via the five senses, and filters and   
organises the stimuli until it has meaning. In order to deal with the mass of stimuli   
from the outside world, such as the multitude of colours, smells, sounds, shapes   
and so on in a supermarket, the brain uses organisational patterns or schema to   
shape interpretation.

Marketers have long studied the psychology of human behaviour to

distinguish their products from the many others in a supermarket, and our list

includes only some of the strategies they use. This illustrates how reality is

constructed by the way our brains process sights, sounds, smells and so on, and by how we have learned to interpret these meanings.

Discussion questions and solutions

Defining communication

1. Which of the four definitions of communication given in the ‘Defining

communication’ section seems to be the most useful and appropriate in your work as a student?

*All these definitions are useful depending upon the circumstances. No single definition encompasses all the situations where communication is involved. Students should be encouraged to examine each of the definitions proposed and maybe in groups discuss how each may or may not apply to their   
particular experiences or professions. The tutor could then lead a discussion of the differences and contexts.*

2. Which forms of communication are most important in your profession?   
 Give some examples and describe situations in which communication   
 competence is important for you as a professional.

*Answers will vary greatly here. Students should be encouraged to discuss this topic with reference to their own professional experience.*

3. Discuss a recent case involving professional life in which poor   
 communication has had serious results.

*Probably the most serious case was the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in*

*April 1986. One of the reasons why this nuclear reactor could not be turned off was poor technical communication in the instruction manuals.*

4. What do you understand by the term ‘whistleblowing’? You may need to do   
 some research on this one.

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*A whistleblower is someone who informs the public about dishonest,*

*unethical or criminal activities of government departments, public/private   
companies, or institutions. The most famous whistleblower of recent times   
is Julian Assange and the WikiLeaks website (*[*http://www.wikileaks.org*](http://www.wikileaks.org/)*).*

5. Examine and discuss the ethics involved in a recent case of whistleblowing   
 in your profession.

*Answers will vary here. In academia, in 1996 physics professor Alan Sokal   
submitted a hoax article to Social Text, a respected scholarly journal of   
postmodern cultural studies. The purpose of this was to test the journal’s   
intellectual rigor and to discover whether a humanities journal would   
publish nonsense if it sounded good enough and contained impressive   
ideological concepts. The article, called ‘Transgressing the boundaries:   
towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity’, ludicrously   
proposed that quantum gravity was a social and linguistic construct. The   
journal did not peer-review the submission, thus the article was not checked   
by an expert physicist. Upon the article’s publication in May 1996, Sokal   
revealed that it was a hoax, ‘a pastiche of Left-wing cant, fawning   
references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense … structured   
around the most ridiculous quotations he could find about mathematics and   
physics’.*

*The scandal that ensued centred on the fact that the article was   
published by a well-respected humanities journal, not only making a   
mockery of the humanities but also academic research publications in   
general.*

The transmission model of communication

6. In his 1967 book *Understanding Media*, communication theorist Marshall   
 McLuhan said, ‘The medium is the message’ (p. 15). He meant that the   
 choice of medium can transform a message and its meaning. Discuss this   
 idea.

*Student answers may vary as this is discussed. The focus should be on the   
transmission model of communication. Students could review this question   
after reading the introduction to the ‘What is mediated communication?’*

*section for additional interpretations of McLuhan’s work.*

7. We claim in the ‘Purpose in communicating’ section that the choice of

media is as important as the message itself. If you were asked to give advice to the 500 students in Stage 1 of your course on plagiarism and how to   
avoid it, how would you communicate your message?

*One possible response is to provide a lecture on copyright and plagiarism, with Web-based examples and written materials as handouts. A copyright expert could be asked to address the lecture, and the software program Turnitin, which checks its own databases and the Internet for instances of student plagiarism, could be used as an example.*

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Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each of these forms of media in communicating this message to this particular audience:

a. word-of-mouth communication in small-group briefing sessions

*Useful for the ability to answer specific questions and give specific answers to address group concerns. If students could bring examples of possible violations, then even better.*

b. email announcements to all students

*Only useful as a reminder, since not all emails are read or received in time.*

c. an article in the weekly student newspaper

*Might be useful, but would need to be general. May not be effective as few students read such publications*

d. a speech to the whole group in a large lecture hall with an   
 accompanying PowerPoint slideshow

*An advantage of this is that it allows communication of the issue to a large   
number of students simultaneously. Also, slides can be produced for future   
reference. A limitation is that a lecture does not usually allow questions to   
be answered and students can easily tune out or be distracted by things   
such as mobile phones. Attendance at lectures is also unpopular unless   
there is a quiz or exam linked to the information. Unless a roll is marked, we   
find that students stop attending lectures as the term progresses.*

e. a continuous video, set up in the student cafeteria

*Totally useless, since student cafés are places where students relax and socialise. The information effect would be minimal.*

f. an interactive, self-paced tutorial on the faculty’s website.

*Possibly useful, but the value of self-paced tutorials is debatable. Again,*

*there is no provision for answering questions. The tutorial would need to be carefully written, and the results of online quizzes taken with a grain of salt. This may be useful as a resource or point of reference for particular   
questions, or for early career instructors to learn the material.*

Feedback

8. We define feedback as the response to a message. Without it, we cannot   
 be sure we have communicated effectively. But how do we get feedback?   
 Form groups of four or five and discuss specific methods of seeking   
 feedback in the two situations described below. Compile the list on a   
 whiteboard, overhead transparency or butcher’s paper and compare your   
 list with those of other groups.

a. Your lecturer keeps giving you poor marks for written assignments   
 but few comments. You would like to improve your assessments.

*Answers will vary but could include checking the assignment guidelines to   
make sure you followed the instructions, making an appointment to discuss   
your marks, emailing the lecturer for more feedback, asking other tutors for   
assistance, asking the Learning Centre for advice, and checking friends’*

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*assignments for their comments. There are also a few (US) websites that   
supposedly coach you (for a fee) in writing your assignments. We have not   
checked the quality of any of these sites, so it is a case of buyer beware.*

b. Promotion is coming slowly to you in your firm. Despite having

finished a higher-education degree and having won two company   
awards for creative design, you have remained in the same position   
for three years while watching contemporaries surge ahead of you.

*Options include talking to your immediate superior for advice, obtaining*

*feedback from trusted colleagues, and perhaps visiting HR for feedback and advice on performance reviews and how to improve your status within the company. Employing a career coach is also a popular way of improving   
one’s career prospects.*

The transaction model of communication

9. Test the claim that ‘meanings are in people, not in words’. Ask members of   
 your group to write down and then compare notes on brief definitions of   
 the following:

a. company loyalty

b. the climate crisis

c. sustainable development

d. globalisation

e. border protection

f. professional integrity

g. crisis management

h. spin doctoring.

*Answers will vary considerably here. The aim is to demonstrate how class   
members believe in certain ideas according to their respective cultures,   
education, interests and political perspectives. In our experience, for   
example, some students may perceive ‘border protection’ as a real crisis   
where the government needs to stop asylum seekers from entering the   
country in an ‘illegal manner’. This is just media hype, however, since there   
is no such thing as a legal asylum seeker. Others may ask, ‘What are we   
protecting our borders from?’ or ‘Is the term merely a form of xenophobia   
[fear of others] dressed up euphemistically?’.*

*As a back-up, instructors can prepare alternative meanings for the*

*terms; for example, climate change (climate scepticism), border protection (violations of UN agreements), company loyalty (scapegoating),   
professional integrity (examples of fraud and illegal professional activity) and crisis management (lying, misinformation and deception).*

10. On separate sheets of paper, write one-sentence definitions of

professionalism, loyalty, quality, productivity and transparency. Then, in small groups, exchange your definitions and discuss the varieties of meaning. Note the differences of perspective and emphasis.

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*The activities in 9 and 10 usually produce many different definitions and examples from students. As with question 9, instructors could prepare in advance alternate meanings for ‘professionalism’,’ loyalty’,’ quality’, ‘productivity’ and ‘transparency’.*

11. Write a sentence containing a statement of fact, as you see it - a truism; for   
 example, ‘Redheads are bad tempered’. Exchange your statement for a   
 partner’s sentence and see if you can agree on their meanings.

*There are many such truisms which may be discussed. Examples include: ‘Blondes have more fun’, ‘Fat people are jolly people’, ‘Asian people are inscrutable’, and ‘Russians are very careful with money’. It would be useful to extend this discussion to explore why and how these kinds of statements become ‘truisms’ and their impact on broader perceptions.*

Websites

• [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/communication_theory/) (Wikipedia)

• [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291468-2958](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28issn%291468-2958/)   
 (Human Communication Research)

• <http://www.hcrc.ed.ac.uk/> (Human Communication Research Centre)

• <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/help/moved/> (Oxford journals)

• [http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=1050-3293](http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=1050-3293/) (Wiley journal

Communication Theory)

• [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikimedia/en-](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikimedia/en-/)

labs/5/51/Communication\_Theory.pdf (Communication Theory)

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Key terms

- transmission theories of communication

- Shannon and Weaver’s model of communication

- Berlo’s model of communication

- transaction model of communication

- communication and perception

- communication and culture

- communication and gender

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Australian and American spellings in your searches; for example, ‘globalisation’ and ‘globalization’; ‘organisation’ and ‘organization’.

Online resources

Instructors and students can access more case studies, online exercises and   
research activities here [http://login.cengagebrain.com.](http://login.cengagebrain.com./)