Research to Practice Column


Is it meaningful communication or rhetorical bafflegab?
Lee Bartel

During the past 10 months I attended five international conferences among which two particularly stand out: one in Texas and one in Italy. I was struck by the communication issues I encountered. Since the process of translating research to practice depends on successful communication, I will examine potential barriers to effective communication of the substance of research.

The most obvious communication issue is the cross-cultural one: where the language of presentation is not the native language of the presenter (or reciprocally, the listener). There usually is no doubt that the person trying to communicate is intelligent and thoroughly understands the ideas, but the presenter may not be successful at transmitting those ideas to listeners because the common tools of language (vocabulary and semantics, grammar and syntax, idioms, and expressive devices such as metaphors, similes, and analogies) are not adequately and proficiently managed. The result is that the ideas expressed, the concepts to be transmitted, do not have the communicative precision and clarity to register accurately, with contextual meaning, in the listener’s mind. This was the case in a number of presentations at ISME in Italy. The English speaking listener feels dissatisfied with the level of understanding possible, and the presenter feels inadequate to the demands of the communication expected. The privileged language is on the side of the listener and not the presenter. In a conference context like this the presenter may feel disempowered and excluded by the “dominant discourse” – the language of presentation.

The Texas conference I attended focused for me another, and in many ways, more disconcerting issue in communication: the use of specialized vocabulary. Academics are often guilty of using specialized vocabulary – sometimes called “academese.” This is usually in one of four forms: (1) having a large vocabulary and showing it off in a pretentious way. Conrad Black has been accused of this. The phrase someone may use as a joke illustrates this, “May I have the extreme felicity to escort your corporal being to your familial domicile while the great diurnal luminary sinks to its nocturnal repose?” (2) using technical language, unique words that mean specific things (usually related to objects or quite readily definable phenomena) in that context. This is especially true in science and medicine, e.g., quark or neutrino. (3) using language that has unique meaning in a particular context while having a different meaning in another. For example, in education we now refer to “rubrics” in relation to evaluation, and teachers generally know this word, the concept, and the practice. If used by a teacher in context of a liturgical conference it could lead to considerable confusion. In music this might include
flat, sharp, counterpoint, projection, balance, etc. (4) a specialized vocabulary of words with complex contextual meanings, sometimes newly created variants of common words, so that they are not easily explained, but that are also used in ordinary language, and consequently, can lead to considerable communicative confusion. I will illustrate.

At the Texas conference the specialized vocabulary was drawn heavily from postmodern, post-structural, critical theory writing and speaking (“discourse” might seem an appropriate term here but “discourse” in a postmodern context means considerably more than mere writing and speaking). To illustrate the “language” of this context I did a casual content analysis of the journal of the sponsoring society and wrote the following bogus paragraph:

The discourses of this conference created particular spaces for a re-theorizing of the problematic I am continually interrogating in conjunction with my subjectivity and resultant performativity as "academic," "musician," and "researcher." This problematic is framed by my embodied knowledge of currere reshaped by years of study, my idealized transformatory pedagogic imaginary, and my perceived and experienced agency restrained by the othering effect of the transgressive acts of some of my colleagues. The resultant crashing congruence of (con)science has launched me into a Deleuzian "line of flight" toward a (re)visioning of the place and power of "ecstasy" in the musical experience of a democratized and multi-vocal classroom.

When I showed this to “insiders” in the postmodern discourse, they commented on my run-on sentences, or questioned why I was blaming my state of mind on Deleuze. In other words, they seemed unaware that this was a contrived bit of gobble-de-gook. I assume that to most people, including some reasonably smart and educated people (by this I mean myself), this paragraph makes very little sense. But my attempt at opaque writing does not succeed as well as that of Deleuze himself, as follows:

In the first place, singularities-events correspond to heterogeneous series which are organized into a system which is neither stable nor unstable, but rather 'metastable,' endowed with a potential energy wherein the differences between series are distributed... In the second place, singularities possess a process of auto-unification, always mobile and displaced to the extent that a paradoxical element traverses the series and makes them resonate, enveloping the corresponding singular points in a single aleatory point and all the emissions, all dice throws, in a single cast. (quoted in Dawkins, 1998)

I sense that in my befuddlement by postmodern writing, I am not the only one that finds much of it coded in a rhetoric designed to make me feel stupid, outside the loop, or to use a postmodern term, have an othering effect on me. The highly articulate thinker and writer, Richard Dawkins (1998), believes that some postmodernists, “deliberately obscure weak or nonsensical ideas with ostentatious and difficult to understand verbiage.” The noted linguist, Noam Chomsky (1995), similarly contends that postmodernists seem unable to clearly explain their position:
There are lots of things I don't understand — say, the latest debates over whether neutrinos have mass or the way that Fermat's last theorem was (apparently) proven recently. But from 50 years in this game, I have learned two things: (1) I can ask friends who work in these areas to explain it to me at a level that I can understand, and they can do so, without particular difficulty; (2) if I'm interested, I can proceed to learn more so that I will come to understand it. Now Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Kristeva, etc. — even Foucault, whom I knew and liked, and who was somewhat different from the rest — write things that I also don’t understand, but (1) and (2) don't hold: no one who says they do understand can explain it to me and I haven't a clue as to how to proceed to overcome my failures. That leaves one of two possibilities: (a) some new advance in intellectual life has been made, perhaps some sudden genetic mutation, which has created a form of "theory" that is beyond quantum theory, topology, etc., in depth and profundity; or (b) I won't spell it out.

I do not doubt that postmodern scholars and critical theorists today are making important observations about aspects of our society and culture. Many of the issues related to race, gender, or economic power relations are crucial to developing a democratized, just society. However, I am very concerned that these scholars (and this is not only limited to postmodern scholars), in the “research to practice” communication link, may be reducing their effectiveness through a self-gratifying (intellectual masturbation) and self-aggrandizing (propping up a weak “self-esteem,” or as they would say “subjectivity” with the use of “I’m smarter than you” language) jargon and rhetorical style. As Dawkins (1998) states:

No doubt there exist thoughts so profound that most of us will not understand the language in which they are expressed. And no doubt there is also language designed to be unintelligible in order to conceal an absence of honest thought. But how are we to tell the difference? What if it really takes an expert eye to detect whether the emperor has clothes? In particular, how shall we know whether the modish French 'philosophy', whose disciples and exponents have all but taken over large sections of American academic life, is genuinely profound or the vacuous rhetoric of mountebanks and charlatans?

The rhetorical style used by postmodernists and critical theorists today has its roots in the French intellectuals they revere and emulate. Peter Medawar (1982) observes of these philosophers,

Style has become an object of first importance, and what a style it is! For me it has a prancing, high-stepping quality, full of self-importance; elevated indeed, but in the balletic manner, and stopping from time to time in studied attitudes, as if awaiting an outburst of applause. It has had a deplorable influence on the quality of modern thought...

It seems to be a rhetorical style designed to demonstrate intellectual prowess rather than to communicate effectively. I recognize that I may, in fact, be making an assumption here
that is not shared by postmodernists, that is the antithesis of postmodern thought – that communication is to be clear. Postmodern thinkers try to avoid clear, definitive, generalizable “truth” claims and therefore, perhaps, do not want to make what they say too clear to others. However, the espoused purpose of most critical theorists is to effect greater justice, greater democratization, greater equity in society, but the very language with which they try to communicate their ideas shuts out people rather than includes them, creates intellectual inequality, and serves as an act of “power over” others outside their discursive community. Their social justice purposes would seem better served with effective communication.

In effective communication, the communicator selects the content that is to be communicated and employs communicative techniques to help the receiver develop as clear an understanding of the message as possible. An assumption here is that the communicator and receiver are both limited by their existing understanding contexts – their unique construct sets of meanings and realities. The responsibility lies with the communicator to anticipate the receiver’s understanding potential and context and to match the communication to that. So the communicator has content to be communicated (ideas, propositions, assertions, etc) and employs a style (particular vocabulary, explanations, descriptions, illustrations, stories, etc) enhanced by rhetorical devices (artistic and expressive techniques, presentational forms, etc) to help the receiver develop as close a representational match as possible to the communicator’s knowledge.

The communicator, however, does not always want to communicate only the overt content of the message. Sometimes the communicator also wants to communicate superiority, status, inclusion or exclusion, an illusion of objectivity, or credibility. This can be done with the communication style and rhetorical devices (e.g., third person passive scientific style to give the illusion of objectivity). When the communicator does not successfully connect to the receiver and muddles the communication with other agendas the receiver may be left disempowered and excluded by the “dominant discourse.”

With globally inter-connected and inter-dependent societies wrestling with crucial issues of value and humanity, academics who want to contribute meaningfully to the discourse must find ways of over-coming communicative barriers. To be worth anything at all, research must connect to practice. Researchers must talk so that other researchers understand. Researchers must talk so that practitioners understand.

References


http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/chomsky-on-postmodernism.html