Andrews University

School of Education

REFLECTING ON COMMUNICATION

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Leadership Program

by

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Introduction

In this reflection paper I consider connecting communication theory to my primarily electronic communication. Several communication and social theories apply to my communication and leadership using social networking tools. In addition, communication theory and principles applied to videoconferencing can improve my communication via videoconference. Finally, I end with thoughts on improving my practice and directions for future learning.

Social Networking Communication

Of all the reading for this competency, Clay Shirky's (2008) book on social networking struck the resonating chord with me. He applied several social and communication theories to current methods of electronic communication. His theories and ideas explain my networks and groups and provide the rationale for why I have become a leader in the K12 videoconferencing arena. In this section, I will review Shirky's work, the theories that he uses, and how these concepts connect to my communication and leadership.

Clay Shirky (2008) addresses the new ways that the Internet is affecting communications and collaboration. He tells stories to explain: how the online community helped a girl get her phone back from the person who stole it; the aggregation of photos about a hometown parade on Coney Island, New York, via Flickr, an online photo sharing site; and the effects of photo sharing on the 2006 military coup in Thailand. He describes the changing profession of journalist as compared to the scribe before the

1

printing press. Communication has changed from filter, then publish; to publish, then filter. This shift has ramifications for all types of communication. Wikipedia is used as an example of collaborative production. Several examples are provided of the Internet enabling collective action against institutions that didn't expect that type of response, including the rise of a new organization against priest abuse and passengers creating an Airline Passengers Bill of Rights. Flash mobs and collection action against repressive governments show how the social tools have challenged the government's ability to control its population. Shirky suggests this change means that "freedom of speech is now freedom of the press and freedom of the press is now freedom of assembly" (Shirky, 2008, p. 171). All of these examples throughout show how society and communication are changing together based on the capabilities of the new tools available on the Internet.

Shirky (2008) uses Coasean theory (Coase, 1937, 1960) to discuss the implications and changes for organizations and groups. "The organization grows only when the advantages that can be gotten from directing the work of additional employees are less than the transaction costs of managing them" (Shirky, 2008, p. 43). In the past, if tasks were not worth managing, they would not be done. But now, many of those things are being done because the Internet allows groups to organize and share and act collectively; all without a manager or for pay. Now "serious, complex work" can be done without institutional direction (Shirky, 2008, p. 47). "The cost of all kinds of group activity – sharing, cooperative, and collective action – have fallen so far so fast that activities previously hidden beneath [the Coasean floor] are now coming to light" (Shirky, 2008, p. 47). Work can get done without managerial direction or a profit motive.
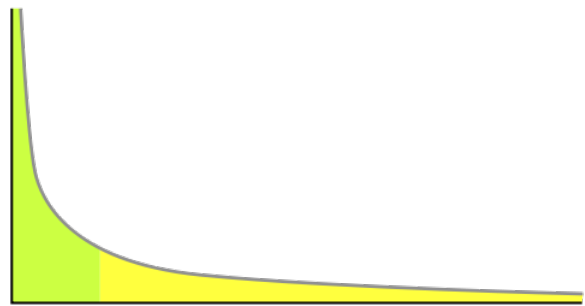
A good example of this type of work in my life is the "Jazz" workshop, which I have used for several competencies (See 1c: Section C). 123 VC: Jazzing Up Your

Curriculum with Videoconferencing is a grassroots collaborative learning community that began in 2005. Ken Conn and Bennie Tschoerner, members of the Texas Distance Learning Association, invited me to team teach in a week long workshop on videoconferencing and collaborative learning tools. Since that humble beginning, the learning community has grown to encompass three weeks of workshops connecting 3 countries, 5 time zones, 5 lead facilitators, 24 locations, and about 300 participants in the summer of 2009. The group has grown by invitation or application, and without compensation to any of the facilitators. None of us have a manager telling us to collaborate with each other. We are collaborating cross organizational and geographical boundaries, without anyone motivating or preventing us. Tools on the Internet allow us to organize, share, and act collectively without a manager.

Shirky (2008) suggests that there are three levels of group activities. The first level is simply sharing information or your work. This first level is demonstrated in my artifacts Section A of web communication. I use these websites to share information with others. My online communication via blogging and microblogging in Section C include some sharing. The second level is cooperation. This requires changing your behavior to synchronize with others; i.e. conversation. Within this level is collaborative production which "increases the tension between individual and group goals" (Shirky, 2008, p. 50). Conversation is evident in both my blog and Twitter as conversation flows around the best uses of videoconference within and across my colleagues blogs and Twitter feeds. Collaborative production is evidenced in Section B the online conferences, where I coordinated many people in collaborative production of an online event. The final level is collective action, which requires a group to commit themselves to undertake an effort and to "do so in a way that makes the decision of the group binding on the individual
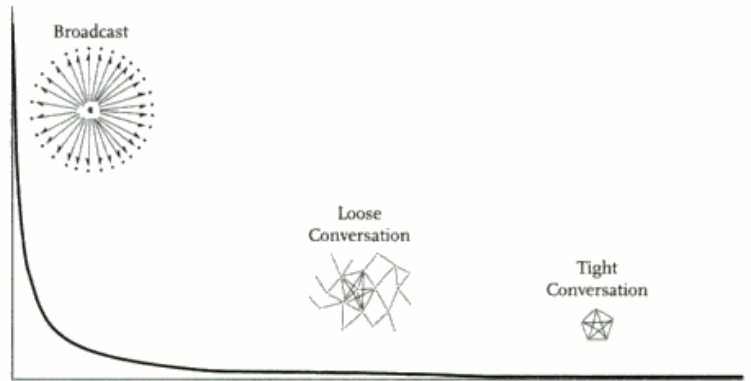
3

members" (Shirky, 2008, p. 51). The "cohesion of the group" is critical to success in this scenario. Collective action also requires some kind of governance. The Jazz workshop mentioned above is an example of collective action. Social networking tools as well as email and videoconferencing allow us to consistently annually conduct a workshop across multiple sites and geographic locations. The new social networks online makes it so that group forming is "ridiculously easy" (Paquet, 2002). The social network tools have also made the participants and facilitators feel much closer together than would be possible otherwise.

Another interesting law used throughout Shirky's book is the power law. A power law distribution is when "the size of the event increases at a greater rate than the frequency decreases" (Wikipedia, 2009a). The power distribution is also known as the 80/20 rule. Ever heard that 20% of the people do 80% of the work? This same imbalance is called "the long tail" by Chris Anderson (2006) in the context of selling less for more. This power law explains how Wikipedia works. People don't contribute equally. But those little tweaks here and there by people who do only one or two edits make an overall better product. The same shape appears all over the Internet: a "graph of the distribution of photo labels/tags on Flickr", the "graph of readers-per-weblog and contributions-per-user on Wikipedia" (Shirky, 2008, p. 124). This imbalance "drives large social systems rather than damaging them" (p. 125). Any user in the group is not an average. There isn't an average that is representative of the whole. Instead you should think of the "behavior of the collective" (Shirky, 2008, p. 128). This law even

describes the number of interactions between groups. A few of the bloggers on the Internet are broadcast to many people and therefore have shallow conversations if any at all. Many, many more of the blogs are among a tight niche of friends or colleagues and are tight conversations. I believe my videoconferencing blog fits into the loose conversation category. I have close friends and colleagues across the country who I collaborate with in multiple ways. The conversation started on my blog with these friends continues in real-time and within work we share. Other blog readers are in the videoconferencing industry and may comment occasionally but are not usually part of the conversation.
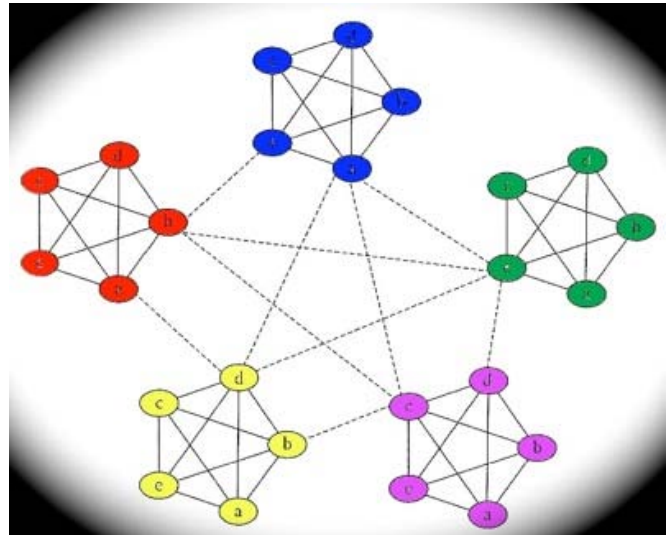
These sharing and collaborative sharing situations across the Internet raise a question. Why do people contribute to something like Wikipedia? Why do facilitators want to be part of the Jazz community? Why do people share? Shirky references Yochai Benkler's work on commons based peer production, where people are happy to cooperate without a financial reward (Benkler, 2006). People share because of the desire to make a meaningful contribution and to make their mark on the world. Because of this, group effort is changing. Little nonfinancial motivations "add up to something of global significance" (Shirky, 2008, p. 133). Shirky describes how humans fairness even at personal cost. "This in turn suggests that relying on nonfinancial motivations may actually make systems more tolerant of variable participation" (Shirky, 2008, p. 134). In the Jazz workshop, there is no financial incentives. While we have expectations for

5

contribution and participation, no one pays to participate or gets paid to facilitate. The

nonfinancial motivations include the benefit to the participants coming to the workshop,

a better, richer experience that none of us could provide for our participants on our own.

In turn, we are tolerant of variable participation, realizing that each person is on a

learning journey and that as they grow and participate in Jazz year after year, they will

learn to contribute more and more. If financial motivations were included, we would

probably be very frustrated with certain facilitators!

Shirky (2008) discusses social capital and the shadow of the future, which explain

how we manage to trust each other. It could be considered amazing that anyone can trust

someone on the Internet. Yet the concept of Tit-for-Tat, as the best strategy for the

Prisoner's Dilemma, explains how we trust (Shirky, 2008; Wikipedia, 2009b, 2009c).

Game theory creates a scenario where the prisoner must decide whether to cooperate or

not with another prisoner. Tit-for-Tat is the strategy to keep cooperating whenever the

other person cooperated. This strategy is how we manage to trust each other. We act on

each others' behalf today; with the expectation that you will reciprocate tomorrow. This

is how social capital is built. Shirky references Axlerod, who calls this "the shadow of

the future" (Axelrod, 1985). We expect reciprocation tomorrow. Covey (2006) calls this

extending trust, and emphasizes how extending trust creates trust in the other person. I

choose to trust each time that I post information on my blog. Sharing information is a

source of trust. I share resources freely, trusting others to credit the source. When the rare

doubt or fear of someone stealing my work arises; I force it down with a choice to trust. I

choose to cooperate, trust and share.

Another important concept is that of bonding capital and bridging capital, which

Shirky references from sociologists such as Burt (Burt, 2003; Shirky, 2008). Bonding

capital "is an increase in the depth of connections and trust within a relatively homogenous group; bridging capital is an increase in connections among relatively heterogeneous groups" (Shirky, 2008, p. 222). The new tools give the most connected people more leverage. "The tightness of a large social network" comes from "increasing the number of connections that the most connected people can support" (p. 225). The concepts of bridging and bonding capital partly explain why I am a leader in videoconferencing without having a formal leadership position. Highly connected people form the backbone of social networks (p. 214). I am part of the backbone of the K12 curriculum videoconferencing social network. I connect people to each other. People ask me for references to others. The figure above explains this concept. The network has fewer connections than if everyone was connected to everyone, but everyone is still 3 degrees apart. Some nodes hold together the whole. I am a Connector (Gladwell, 2002), an ambassador. I create links between people.

The concept of bridging capital also explains my good ideas, such as Collaborations Around the Planet or "CAPspace', a fast growing social network for videoconferencing that started in 2007. I am the main dreamer for what it should do, with a small committee basically overseeing the work. Bridging capital explains good ideas; "lack of bridging predicted bad ones" (p. 231). Shirky quotes Burt "People whose

7

networks span structural holes have early access to diverse, often contradictory, information and interpretations which gives them a good competitive advantage in delivering good ideas" (Burt, 2003; Shirky, 2008). My social network includes 121 blog subscriptions on wide topics of technology, educational technology, and videoconferencing from education and industry. My social network includes the 194 videoconferencing and educational technology colleagues that I follow on Twitter and the 160 colleagues that follow me (See artifacts in Section C). My network includes the colleagues who collaborate and work with me on projects for our students, who I talk to via Skype, email and videoconferencing almost daily. These connections give me an edge, a competitive advantage for thinking of new ideas to meet the changing needs I see throughout my network.

Geographical barriers are broken with new social tools. Shirky gives the example of an Episcopalian Church in Virginia that declared itself part of another diocese in Nigeria (Shirky, 2008, p. 155). The Jazz workshop is the same way. We collaborate, without institutional direction, across geographical borders, based on who we know and feel we can collaborate with. Shirky suggests that groups need to have three components to work in the new forms: a plausible promise, tools fit to the task, and an acceptable bargain. The Jazz workshop includes a plausible promise: the experience of a workshop that each one could not provide to their participants without Jazz. The tools for the task include GoogleDocs for collaborative document sharing, Moodle as a website to share resources, videoconferencing as the tool to connect our sites together, Skype and Twitter as real-time chat tools to keep us connected to each other. The acceptable bargain is that we will each contribute to the workshop so that we can all receive the whole which is greater than what we could do on our own. The idea behind Jazz is that "if you help, this

will get better" (Shirky, 2008, p. 278). After reading Shirky, I realized that it is acceptable to have the 80/20 rule, because truncating the system at the head actually "cuts off a critical piece of the overall ecosystem" p. 279. The new facilitators and those just learning to contribute still contribute a novice perspective which keeps making the workshop better each year. Jazz uses the framework of Small World Networks as shown again. These small groups within a bigger more diffuse group is the new kind of organization. The lead facilitators and the veteran facilitators are the connectors between the small groups. This format makes it easier for the workshop to grow without causing undue stress on any one person in the network.

Finally, the concept of plausible promise explains the success of a the social network for videoconferencing: Collaborations Around the Planet. I am highly involved in the creation and development of this site (See Competency 5, Section C). The reasons the site is a success, I now realize, is that it offers a plausible promise. Instead of just a site to "add friends" and search for people, it is also the registration system for a popular videoconference event called Read Around the Planet (See Competency 3a: Section C). This event attracts over 1500 classrooms annually to participate. This event keeps people coming back to the site and is the foundation of its success.

Shirky's (2008) work connected social and communication theory to explain social and communication behaviors online. This work helped me see how my own electronic communication and collaboration is understood through these theories. It lays a foundation under my work so that I can better explain and understand the success of my work and how to continue to improve.

Communication Theory in Videoconferencing

Another major part of my study in the communication competency was to connect research and theory on communication with my work in videoconferencing. In this section, I review and reflect on the research and theory articles as they pertain to videoconferencing.

Tools for Geographically Dispersed Teams

Videoconferencing can be used to support geographically dispersed teams. Baker (2000) conducted an experiment to compare the function of groups with text only, audio only, text and video, and audio and video. The groups were playing simulation games that required them to choose between short term individual interest and long term collective interest. In the study, the participants used CU-SeeMe, but the study references room based videoconferencing as well. The participants were undergraduate students. The technical method of group interaction was compared with the quality of the group's strategy decision, the group cohesiveness, and the group's task performance. The results show that the quality of the strategy decision had a significant effect on task performance, and that task performance had an effect on group cohesiveness. Video added a significant impact on the strategy decision, but not on cohesiveness. The text based communication allowed for greater concurrency because many people could talk at the same time.

There are two components of group collaboration: "the distribution of communication among participants, how group members interact in the dissemination of information, and the members' capability to communication information and group choice" (Baker, 2000, p. 6). Synchronicity is the ability of a medium to provide rapid

communication in both directions and how easily the receiver can interrupt the sender (p. 15). Concurrency is how many simultaneous conversations can happen in the medium.

This study confirmed for me how we work in the Jazz workshop mentioned previously. All the tools are used: collaborative document sharing, Twitter, Skype, chat rooms, discussion boards, wikis, and audio conferencing, and videoconferencing – both desktop and room based. We pick and choose the tools based on what is needed. For the early planning meetings with 20 or more facilitators attending, we use the phone conference supported by a text chat in Skype. The text chat allows for the "side conversation" or supporting conversation to what is covered in the audio review of the content. This way everyone can be involved but it's more efficient. When we get down to the planning the week before Jazz and the evening debriefs with facilitators, we are meeting with 3-4 facilitators in a 4×4 screen layout via video. Here the video is critical as we plan, debrief, mentor, and problem solve the issues that arose in the workshop that day.

The important lesson is to know and use all the tools, and be comfortable with choosing the tool that is most appropriate for the task at hand. Another important lesson comes from the relatively low level of group coherence for all the distance groups. It is very hard to get to know and trust others when meeting at a distance. Yet, in the Jazz workshop, we expect just that! We need to continue to be deliberate about ways to connect the facilitators before hand that we can learn to know and trust each other even more before the actual workshop occurs. It takes time, working with each other ahead of time, and connecting to each other regularly using tools such as blogs, Skype and Twitter.

Challenges to Communication via Videoconferencing

One challenge to communication in videoconferencing is the visual angle (Bekkering, 2004). The visual angle is the distance between the camera and the monitor – which can make it look like the person you are talking with isn't actually looking at you. Bekkering wanted to see if this angle is related to the trust between individuals to possibly explain why videoconferencing has not been adopted as widely as phone and email. The study was done with undergraduate students as the subjects. He found that eye contact is only perceived when the conversation partner looks straight into the camera. In addition, horizontal loss of eye contact decreases perceived trustworthiness, and vertical loss of eye contact decreases perceived trustworthiness. However, perceived trustworthiness in video conditions is higher than in text-only conditions. He concluded that videoconferencing adds to the ability to trust by the "ability to clarify communication with gestures and visual information" (Bekkering, 2004, p. 91). Manufacturers should try to reduce the distance between the lens of the camera and the screen of the unit, particularly for desktop videoconferencing. And, if users are aware of this, they can either compensate by learning to ignore the fact that someone might not be looking directly at you. Or they can try to adjust the camera & screen to place them as close together as possible. These suggestions are important both for my own practice and my training of other videoconference users.

Another challenge in videoconferencing is the effect of seeing yourself, and seeing disturbing distractions on the screen. Wegge (2006) conducted two experiments: one simulated an oral university examination via videoconference, and the second a consultation between a landlord and expert for real estate law. The author considered the oral exam to be an emotional experience, and the consultation would be more emotion

neutral. The study found that students who had high scores for test anxiety experienced more tension, less calmness and performed lower on the test. Wegge also found that the test anxiety is amplified when the participants saw a large picture of themselves. If they saw their picture in a small picture-in-picture, there was no performance differences between high- and low-anxious students. The consultation experiment compared individuals with high negative affectivity and high positive affectivity and their experiences in a videoconference. Wegge found that individuals with high negative affectivity experienced negative emotions more intensely, and individuals with high positive affectivity experienced positive emotions more intensely. Is this because seeing yourself increases self-awareness and provides a special feedback loop? Interesting to consider. Wegge also found that when the participant saw their own picture, the emotions of dislike, anger, and shame were increased compared to when they didn't see their own picture. These negative feelings were increased when there were technical or organizational problems in the videoconference. In the final analysis, Wegge found that when there were problems with the videoconference, the participants had more negative affective reactions, lower ratings on the quality of the counseling, and impaired memory for what they learned from the expert. One application of this study in my work is the placement of the picture-in-picture (PIP). My schools really like our videoconference carts; and the teacher can put down the remote so that the picture in picture goes away (via the "feet" on the Viewstation or VSX remote). Think of the carts with two huge monitors. While the vendors show them with the remote content on the second monitor; more often in K12 videoconferencing that second monitor has your picture in picture. Students tend to misbehave when they can see themselves. As I think about this more, I realize that unless you're teaching full courses via videoconference, you really don't need

that large second monitor. In addition, I train my VC coordinators to consider which teachers to start with first. Who is willing to try something new? Who is flexible and can handle some glitches? I also have them think about who is more likely to be able to handle the videoconference on their own eventually; and which teachers need extra hand-holding to make sure it goes well. I realize again how important it is to make sure that teachers have a good first experience with videoconferencing.

Improving My Practice

As I work to encourage teachers and schools to use videoconferencing and other electronic communication tools, I apply the principles of implementation (Baber, 1996) making sure that there is a champion for the technology as well as administrative support and that the teachers has confidence in the technology (Elliott, 2003). As I communicate daily via videoconference, I consider the eye contact, camera angles, and interaction necessary for effective persuasion (Dustdar & Hofstede, 1999; Ferran-Urdaneta, 2000; McNelley, 2001; Sewell, 2004). Shirky's suggestion to "greet the first ten thousand users personally" in a new community (Shirky, 2008, p. 264) applies to my online courses, the online community we are starting for my church, and to the Collaborations Around the Planet social network. I will consider how to more effectively include the new users so they feel comfortable and welcomed in my online communities.

Future Learning

Again I come to the end of a competency reflection feeling as if I had just scratched the surface. The field of communication is vast and all-encompassing. While I have just examined the connections between communication theory and research in my work, I realize there are many further areas to study. In future reading and learning, I want to focus on conflict management and difficult conversations, as I piqued my interest in this area with one book (Stone et al., 1999). I know this is another area where I can improve. I am also interested in learning further about how our communication affects the change process and will examine this further in the change competency (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Another area of interest is the differences between communication styles of men and women and how that affects the workplace. Clearly my work in the communication area has just begun and the skills and habits I have learned in the Leadership program set me in good stead for further habitual learning.

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