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Encoding & Decoding: Artfully Modeling Communication

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Abstract

Drawing objects and concepts, such as cats, trees, love, democracy, and family, is probably the last activity students expect to do in a communication course. Although this sounds like an introductory art activity, creating visual representations provides a nuanced understanding of the encoding and decoding processes. Encoding and decoding are the most hidden and often the most unfamiliar and complex fundamental components of communication for students to comprehend. By engaging in this activity, students translate their decoding process into drawings, which serve as personal artifacts representative of their encoding and decoding. Students come to better conceptualize this cognitive process with these concrete examples and a directed discussion. This activity is applicable across the full spectrum of communication courses.

Keywords: encoding and decoding; definition of communication; communication models

Courses

Any communication course that discusses the definition and models of communication, such as:

- Introduction to Communication
- Public Speaking
- Intercultural Communication

Introduction and Rationale

Communication is a topic many students assume they know a great deal about because they communicate every day (Hawkins, 2008). Communication instructors know there is much more to the discipline than many introductory students realize. One challenge we face, then, is to demonstrate the complex process of communication in such a way that students can understand the difficulty of effective communication. Engaging in this activity, grounded in active learning, addresses this challenge.

Two concepts that deserve more in-depth attention are encoding and decoding. Encoding “is the process of translating ideas, feelings, and thoughts into a code” (Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2022, p. 10). Examples include “vocalizing a word, gesturing, and establishing eye contact” (Beebe et al., 2022, p. 10). The opposite of encoding is decoding: “the process of interpreting ideas, feelings, and thoughts that have been translated into a code” (Beebe et al., 2022, p. 10). In other words, decoding occurs “when the words or unspoken signals are interpreted by the receiver” (Beebe et al., 2022, p. 10). Although encoding and decoding are conceptually presented in communication courses, both require a more in-depth explication to enhance student comprehension. This process seems simple, but the variabilities in interpretation and translation that transpire during encoding and decoding can lead to minor or gross misunderstandings

between the sender and receiver. Encoding and decoding transpire mentally and, therefore, are the most invisible and often the most unfamiliar and complex fundamental components of communication. While communicating, individuals translate their thoughts into a symbol system, which they then share with others. Upon reception of the encoded message, individuals translate and interpret the symbol system into thoughts. We suggest the following activity to provide a practical understanding of encoding and decoding.

Through this activity, students develop a clearer understanding that as an act of translation, encoding/decoding involves a person's interpretive lens, which develops both within and through socio-cultural-historical experiences. More specifically, this activity (a) enhances students' understanding of the process of audience analysis and its significance, (b) demonstrates the arbitrariness of consensually agreed-upon symbol systems and meanings, and (c) provides several concrete examples of the complexities of the model of communication while simultaneously (d) providing a concrete example of how to speak across difference.

Objectives of Activity

By completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Define encoding and decoding.
- Explain the encoding/decoding processes of translation and interpretation.
- Recognize how socio-economic and cultural factors influence the encoding/decoding processes.
- Identify how the encoding/decoding processes can lead to different understandings.
- Apply their deepened comprehension of the encoding/decoding processes to activities like audience analysis.

Description of Activity

This activity is conducted early in the semester after students learn about the definition and model(s) of communication. More specifically, the activity should follow scheduled reading that covers the communication model(s) if addressed in the course text(s). It is also helpful to provide students insight into your background, revealing information that aligns with audience analysis demographics. To complete this activity, each student needs a sheet of paper and a writing utensil. The instructor needs access to a document camera or a chalk/whiteboard.

Procedures/Steps

Begin by defining communication and its related concepts using the course text(s). The following are suggestions/examples used in an intercultural communication class:

- a. Communication: The symbolic process whereby “reality” is constructed, maintained, repaired, transformed, and struggled over (Carey, 2009). Terms like reality or lived experience might need to be conceptualized for introductory students unfamiliar with their usage in communication-based courses.
- b. Symbol: “a sign, artifact, word(s), gesture, or nonverbal behavior that stands for or reflects something meaningful” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2022, p. 23).
- c. Meaning: The “interpretations that we attach to a symbol...can cue both objective and subjective reactions” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2022, p. 23).

After defining the key terms, review the evolution of the model(s) of communication. Define and explain the fundamental components: (a) sender/receiver, (b) message, (c) channel, (d) receiver/sender, (e) noise, (f) feedback, (g) environment/context, (h) encoding, and (i) decoding.

Excluding this lecture component, the activity takes about 30 minutes to complete.

The first step is the creation of the student's representational art. Direct the students to take out their paper and a writing utensil. Instruct the students that you (the instructor) will encode five thoughts into five symbols/words. After hearing each, the students should decode it as a drawing on the paper according to what they believe you meant in the encoding process. They are not allowed to use any words in their art. To alleviate anxiety about the quality of their drawings, assure the students that their artistic abilities are not significant for this exercise. The words you convey to them should move from those that represent the concrete and highly consensual to those that are abstract and ambiguous/contested. For example: a. Tree (concrete/high consensus), b. America (concrete/ambiguous), c. Love (abstract/high consensus), d. Democracy (abstract/ambiguous), and e. Family (abstract/contested). The instructor should also prepare drawings that represent their encoding of each symbol to compare with the student's work in the next step.

Step two involves the students revealing their art while simultaneously identifying comparisons to the instructor's. Observe their work as they draw, selecting whose work per word to display for the class. Upon completion, ask the students you identified if they are willing to share their drawings. Then, have the selected students either project their art using a document camera or redraw their work on the chalk/whiteboard. Ask them to discuss why they chose to represent how they decoded the word with the drawing they shared. Inquire of those students who drew similar images to raise their hands. Follow up by asking if anyone has represented the word differently. If there are, ask them to share their drawing. Follow the students' discussion by sharing your drawing. Discuss how your drawings represent the reason(s) why you translated each thought into the words you selected, referring to the concepts used for audience analysis. Broaden the discussion of your reasoning to be an interactive dialogue with the students about

the socio-cultural-historical contexts and personal experiences that influenced your interpretative process, which led to your drawings. Highlight the possible differences between their experiential interpretative lens and yours that led to differences in the drawings.

Beginning Public Speaking students typically understand audience analysis and adaptation as concepts but struggle with the application. This activity highlights the profound significance of audience analysis by demonstrating to the students why speeches should be primarily encoded how the audience would encode the message. As introductory speakers, students slide into encoding the speech message using *their* symbol systems. Audience analysis should guide students to encode more closely to how the *audience* would encode the speech, enhancing their decoding process and message uptake. Although the audience analysis concept may be mentioned at this time, often, this activity is recalled during the discussion of the concept in a later class.

Modifications to this activity may be necessary to meet diverse student needs. For instance, to facilitate a blind or visually impaired student's participation, we enacted the following modifications: The student described the term to her aide, who then created the drawings on her behalf. As students presented their art, the aide verbally described each to the student. Afterward, the student indicated she successfully participated and reaped the benefits of the activity with these modifications. The authors have not encountered other limitations that would impede students from completing this activity.

Debriefing

Follow the drawing exercise with a debrief session in which you dialogue with the students about how the activity demonstrates the numerous ways to encode and decode—translating thought into symbols—by discussing why this knowledge should guide a person

when crafting and listening to messages. Highlight the importance of learning about the other to understand their communication choices. Also, explain how communication with others is enhanced through engaging their lifeworlds by analyzing the socio-historical-cultural context in which they are embedded. In doing so, convey that communication does not transpire in a vacuum, nor does everyone share how we encode a message. Push further by discussing with students what influences might have guided the representations they drew. Then, inquire if the message's effectiveness is enhanced by encoding into symbol systems representative of their perspective or that of the audience. This activity directs students to realize that the significance of audience analysis and cultural understanding is that it enables the sender to encode the message as the audience would decode and uptake it.

Appraisal

Active learning emphasizing engagement is vital to student success (Smith, 2015). Definitions of involvement “point to the opportunities for students to be actively connected to their education, to engagement, and to mattering” (Smith, 2015, p. 219). The success of this activity is dependent on student participation. As Smith (2015) contends, “the sense that the group or others are depending on you for something facilitates involvement, belonging, and engagement” (p. 234). This activity surprises students as they do not anticipate drawing in a communication class. Yet, the benefits of this activity are manifest in the visual representations the students produce. Through sharing these visual representations, students see and thus understand the differences resulting from those factors that influence the encoding and decoding processes. This lays the foundation for later possible discussions that further nuance the encoding and decoding process (e.g., denotative and connotative meaning, listening, role of cognitive schema) and additional, but related concepts like the role of audience analysis, culture, etc. Since

this activity is completed early in the semester, often on the first content day and/or during the first week of class, the expectation is set that student participation is not only necessary, but students depend on one another in this learning environment. For instance, this activity can only be successful if students and the instructor are willing to share their drawings. Doing so sets the stage for engaged participation.

Conclusion

We recommend asking students at the end of class if they found this activity helpful. Many students indicate that this activity helps them enhance their understanding of the encoding and decoding processes. Additionally, they claim that seeing their colleagues' drawings, which are often different from their own, helps them to understand how even concrete symbols, like "tree," can be decoded differently. Although students may initially feel intimidated by having to draw or think that drawing simple objects is "silly," this activity sparks curiosity as the terms get more abstract. Students begin to wonder how drawing these terms links back to the definition and model(s) of communication. During the discussion, many students highlighted how helpful the visuals of this activity are to understanding communication and its encoding and decoding processes. As such, this is a beneficial activity for many introductory communication courses.

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