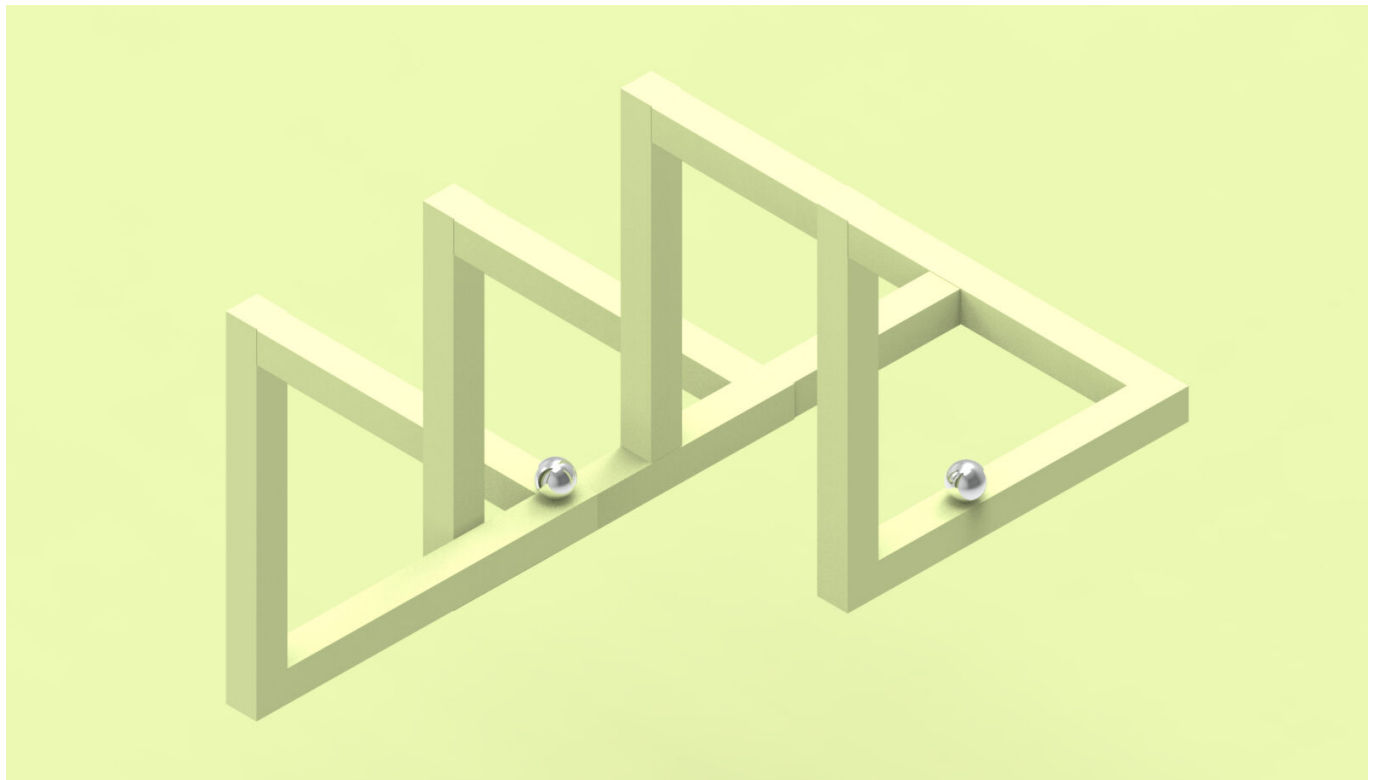


The Illusion of Communication



“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place” - George Bernard Shaw (George Bernard Shaw Quotes, 2022)

I came across George Bernard Shaw’s quote as I was preparing to facilitate a discussion about communication with a group of high school teachers. I loved it because it perfectly summarized the main points that I hoped would be the takeaways of our discussion: the biggest problem with communication is not that we do not know how to do it—it is that we think we are doing it when we are not. Speaking from a sociological perspective, verbal communication is arguably a relatively new phenomenon for humans; one could argue that language, either verbal or otherwise, complicates interactions that other species seem to master through simpler methods. For instance, a certain sound made by a particular animal could suggest that a predator is near. That’s it. Nothing else. The buddies of this animal would not sit and wonder what their peer really meant by making that sound—all of those who did were eaten shortly thereafter. On the other hand, a single word could trigger a million questions when a human utters it in the presence of another. What did they mean by that? Were they

talking about me? Did they sound angry when they said that? The lack of an immediate threat to our survival leads us to overthink anything and everything that we hear.

In my classroom, this problem surfaced in many different circumstances. As a teacher, I am often certain that I have effectively communicated my priorities to students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors. More often than I would like, this is incorrect.

With the utmost certainty, I am inclined to believe that my students know what I am expecting. After all, I outlined our objectives in a syllabus, on the whiteboard daily, and in my phone calls home to their parents. I knelt down next to a disruptive student and leveled with him. We even fist-bumped after. They get it. So, why is that student flicking a paper airplane across the room again in an attempt to score a finger field goal? Why is another student turning off her camera during a Zoom lesson in which we all agreed to remain engaged the entire time? It doesn't make sense.

This dissonance can be frustrating. Our brains do not like frustration. When there are no clear answers to a question or problem, our minds refuse to accept uncertainty. This organ is special at filling the voids and creating answers that can make us feel better. Unfortunately, these fabrications are often based on assumptions. When these assumptions combine with the illusion of communication, a very dangerous thing happens.

Let's go back to my aspiring paper football player. I was certain that I had communicated with this student and that he understood my intention, appreciated my feelings, and his future behavior would reflect the deep connection we established during our 30-second chat. So, how does this illusion mesh with the reality that ensued? Not well. The student's continued disruption now lies in direct conflict with what I perceived to be the knowledge that is at the forefront of this student's mind. He knows how I feel. He knows what I want. And, his refusal to change his behavior is a direct slap to my face. He wants to irritate me, I assume. It's time to roll up my sleeves.

Truth be told, this student might not even know my first name, let alone care

enough to do something that would intentionally hurt me. No. His goal is simply to keep his streak of paper football field goals going. That's it. He took a halftime break to indulge the few words that I shared with him. What was a meaningful conversation for me was nothing more than a pep talk for the future paper football star. I have my objectives. He has his.

Why does this happen? Why do I assume that checking off a box for how I know best to communicate immediately leads to checking off a box for how my student knows to do the same? Is it because I'm short on time? Perhaps it is easier to grow frustrated at a situation that I convince myself I have no control over than it is to think about how I am deluding myself into assuming I have effectively communicated. In the grand scheme of things, the illusion of communication for this particular instance may not have significant consequences. My student is bright. His disruption will likely go on to be a small blemish over the course of an otherwise successful day, week, month, semester, and year. However, what happens when this is not the case? What happens when the illusion of communication takes place in a circumstance with much higher stakes? Throughout nearly a decade of time in the classroom, I have convinced myself that I communicated well with students on multiple occasions. As a result, I have made assumptions about my students many times. Here is an example of a frequent progression for me:

1. I communicate individually to a student that I want to support her in improving her grade.
2. The student thanks me and agrees that she will stick with the plan I created.
3. I set time aside for the student, differentiate my plans, and adjust my grading structures to reward any proficiencies that the student acquires, even if it is later in the semester.
4. The student neglects all of my efforts.

5. I assume the student does not care about improving her grade.

What happened? Look at step 1 and compare it to step 5. Wow! What a change in mentality on my part. Over the course of three steps, I have been so damaged by my illusion of communication that I have moved from being strongly determined to help a student to making a full characterization about the student's motives and philosophy regarding her progress in my class. This is a testament to how powerful being fooled into thinking I have effectively communicated can be. Just as I assumed that my chat with my paper footballer led to creating a genuine connection, I assumed that my benevolent interest in helping a struggling student was a sufficient replacement for a genuine relationship. When both of those assumptions proved to be wrong, different outcomes ensued. In the former case, my frustration grew and I reprimanded a student for what I thought was unacceptable behavior, but truly my feelings were hurt because I saw his disregard of my requests as a personal attack. In the latter case, I convinced myself that my student did not care about my class. I was bold enough to assume that a direct refusal to accept my services was an indication that this individual had no interest in improving her performance in my class.

In both situations, I never looked behind their faces. I would later go on to find out that my paper footballer was homeless and had been sleeping in the back seat of his mom's car for nearly two years. His friends did not know and it was important to him to frequently be seen as a cool guy. While I assumed he was trying to spite me by defying my requests, his attention was on whether his buddies would continue validating the streak of field goals he had going. It was the highlight of his day.

As for my other student, you know, the one I categorized as having no interest in her education, well, she had a few other things on her mind too. Her father had passed away less than a year ago and she had become her mother's main support in raising her three younger brothers. Needless to say, staying after school to indulge my requests for additional tutoring was not high on her list of priorities. Rightfully so, neither was sitting down and explaining her situation to me.

I want to make it clear that I do not outline these brief anecdotes in an attempt to make an impact by trafficking in trauma. The heart of this article is to highlight the dangers that the illusion of communication poses to our daily interactions with others. In these situations, I generated assumptions that filled gaps for me in the moment. It is something I have done and will continue to do for the rest of my life. Furthermore, I am only aware of this because I have been fortunate enough to gain access to insight about some of my students that has challenged the comfort that my assumptions provided. With this in mind, it is concerning to think about how many other curtains have not been lifted for me, and, as a result, how many illusions I continue to live when it comes to communication with my students, peers, colleagues, community members, family and friends.

With my students, assuming that my interactions with them are all separate narratives that I am entering at an uncertain time allows me to always strive to see behind their faces and carefully consider what they are and are not telling or showing me.

In an effort to illustrate some of these additional veils, I'll share aspects of communication dynamics that have underscored my interactions with peers and supervisors throughout my career. In any job that I have worked, if I hear a general message with a potentially negative undertone from a supervisor, I immediately assume it is directed at me and that my job, career, and livelihood are now all at risk. If I am late to a meeting, I assume that this communicates that I do not care about it and so I apologize incessantly. If a sent email does not receive an immediate response, I fabricate a myriad of potential stories for why this is the case—and most are not good.

I cannot control that aspect of how my brain works. I have come to accept that. My brain will travel in whatever direction makes it feel better. However, what I can control is the finality I give to my thoughts. And this, truly, has helped me

fight the illusion of communication. I no longer view interactions as singular events. Instead, I view them as narratives. More importantly, I convince myself that I enter these narratives not at the beginning or end, but at some point in the middle. This mindset helps me in many ways.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned leading a professional development session on communication with colleagues. This time was focused on viewing communication as a series of narratives. As a group, we arrived at the conclusion that conflicts amongst staff, between staff and administration, and between educators and parents/community members, takes place primarily when we assume that the snapshot of time that incorporated a conversation is the beginning, middle, and end of a narrative. For instance, it is easy to assume that a supervisor is out to get us if they did not make eye contact when passing us in the hallway; it is a comfortable solution for our brains to suggest that parents are disinterested in their child's education if they never pick up the phone when we call; it is understandable to believe that a colleague does not like an idea I proposed if they did not 'thumbs up' my message on our text thread.

In each of these situations, it is much more difficult to immediately assume that the supervisor had just heard her husband had an emergency and was rushing back to her office to call without making eye contact to avoid sharing her watery eyes; that a parent does not pick up the phone because he is embarrassed to speak about his son's academics for the 10th time this school year, despite his best efforts to support him at home; or that our colleague did not even see the text message with an idea I proposed because they had 50 other messages to get through. As a group, we concluded that the assumptions place a finality on the communication narrative whereas gaining access to what is behind the curtain potentially extends that narrative in a way that leads to uncertainty, which we rarely prefer in comparison to the finality offered by our presumptions.

With my students, assuming that my interactions with them are all separate narratives that I am entering at an uncertain time allows me to always strive to see behind their faces and carefully consider what they are and are not telling or showing me. One vivid example of how I strive to do this is by recognizing that

community building is not something that strictly happens at the beginning of the school year. I embed questions that ask students about different aspects of their lives in warm ups, exit slips, and even in assessments. I found that something as little as adding a personal note at the end of a test telling a student how grateful I am to get to be their teacher and alluding to something in their lives that they previously shared opens the door for further conversation and connection in the future. With my colleagues, this allows me to realize that an end to a conversation does not mark a final understanding of my or their expectations. I leave conversations fully expecting to follow up and reiterate what I have heard and what I have said. With supervisors, I accept that their illusion of communication is just as powerful as mine, despite our different titles. This helps me grow comfortable with the notion that any conversation I have with them is truly taking place in the middle of their narrative, as well as mine.

This is a comfortable place for me. By no means does this solve the issue that the illusion of communication presents. The illusion that communication has happened will always exist. Realizing that is key to accepting that I will continue to fill gaps with assumptions. And understanding that is key to recognizing when I am placing myself at the beginning or end of someone's narrative. From there, all I have to do is work to turn to the right page.

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