

Sensory Influences on Communication

Introduction

In every social encounter, whether we speak or not, hear or not, see or not, we are constantly communicating with each other. Through signs, gestures, speech, facial expressions, touch or lack of touch, facing someone or turning our backs on someone, we are communicating something. There are a huge variety of rich and complex ways in which people express their thoughts and emotions.

What is communication and what affects it?

Communication could be described as transmitting messages from a sender to a receiver. This process involves two things. First, the way the message is transmitted e.g. sign or speech and second, the content of the message. The message itself may be transmitted accurately and received accurately but the content of the message may not be understood in the same way by the sender and the recipient. That is when we experience misunderstandings and communication breaks down. Why do these misunderstandings occur? One reason is because as humans we have all had a lifetime of varying experiences both educational and emotional. It is those experiences that have an impact on how we perceive others and how we receive their messages to us. So, communication is a very complex procedure.

Now, I am going to make a statement –

‘The quality of communication for someone who has a sight and hearing impairment is inferior to that of someone who has both sight and hearing.’

I wonder if you agree with this statement?

I am now going to highlight some aspects of communication for you to consider. I will put alternate views and ask you to draw your own conclusions.

Channel overload

Channel overload refers to the situation of too many signals being sent at the same time, resulting in the channel being over-loaded and unable to cope effectively with the messages received.

Example: At the moment I am speaking to all of you. Mine is the overriding sound that you are hearing. If, however, I stopped speaking and all of you started speaking to me at the same time, I would experience a channel overload. I wouldn't be able to understand any of you even though I could hear all of the sounds.

We know that the human ear has a relatively limited capacity as a reception channel for sound waves. We also know that the eyes are easily distracted away from the source of communication, when there are numerous visual diversions in the background. It can become difficult, if not impossible, to fully concentrate and appropriately respond to what someone is saying. The other problem is that humans are naturally curious and afraid of missing something. On those occasions our attention is partly with the person communicating with us, and partly on listening and seeing what is going on in the background.

If someone who is profoundly deafblind is in the same situation, what difference does it make? Is the environment as much of a distraction? Is the quality of the interaction lessened by the environment? If someone has a degree of sight and hearing loss they pro-actively aim to get rid of background distractions so that the quality of communication is improved.

Who has the greatest disadvantage, the hearing sighted person or the deafblind person?

Body leakage

Body leakage is related to non-verbal communication. It is the unintentional messages that we convey through our body language that contradicts the spoken messages we are giving.

Example: We might be engaged in a conversation with another person. They are nodding and attentive to what we are saying, but if they take a quick glance at their watch it might convey another message. It might indicate that they are bored or uninterested in what we are saying and can't wait to get away.

Despite our intentions we will very often betray some of our real feelings through our facial expressions, speech patterns and body movements. With sight and hearing we are able to detect these unintentional messages that leak, as it were, from the body.

So would we say that deafblind people are at a disadvantage? Are they unable, because of limited sight and hearing, to detect the genuine messages that body language conveys? Do they miss out on this important information that could change the way they respond to the person? That is one way of looking at it. Let's think back to that situation with the watch. Does a quick glance at a watch necessarily indicate boredom or lack of interest? Could there be some other reason for the person needing to be aware of the time? Of course there could. So, rather than missing out on this aspect of communication, we could say that deafblind people are prevented from misinterpreting these signals by not even having access to them.

Social comparisons

Social comparisons are comparisons people make about themselves with reference to other members of society. When we meet someone we start to form an impression of them even before we communicate with them. We are affected by their appearance, their manner, what clothes they are wearing, the colour of their skin and even their resemblance to someone we have met previously. Then we are affected by what we hear, the way they speak, their accent and their use of words. With both sight and hearing we form an impression which in turn leads us to make assumptions about that person, which can then dictate the attitude we have

towards them. This is called the Primacy Effect, that is, the first information learned about a person tends to have a greater impact than information learned later. There has been a lot of research carried out on the Primacy Effect. In 1975 psychologist Margaret Clifford gave photographs of children and their report cards to teachers, and asked them to judge the likely intelligence and academic potential of each child. The result was that the physically attractive children were consistently rated as having a higher academic potential. Research has shown that if that initial impression is positive we tend to interpret all subsequent information in a positive light, and form an overall positive impression of the person.

We might have the view that this is a necessary part of social interaction. We need to be able to evaluate other people. We could say that deafblind people are at a disadvantage if they don't have access to visual or auditory first impressions. Alternatively we might say that direct communication rather than first impression, is a more reliable and non-judgemental way of forming relationships.

Let's look at this from another angle. Just as we make judgements of other people we know that other people will have their own impressions of us. We are conscious of how others view us, we internalise other people's reactions, we react according to those judgements and this in turn affects our self-image. If we are not able to see or hear other people's reactions, what difference would it make?

Example: David is a farmer who 18 months ago had an accident and lost his sight. Sometime after the accident he was asked to speak about his experience to an audience of approximately 100 people, as part of raising awareness of health and safety. After the event I asked David if he had been nervous talking to such a big audience, knowing that he had lived in a small community and had never done anything like this before. "No," he said, "I couldn't see the audience or their reaction, so I wasn't really bothered."

Example: Jimmy is a profoundly deafblind person. He was in town shopping with his support worker. They had gone into a shop that sold theatrical costumes and wigs. They had a great time trying

things on and before they left Jimmy bought a pair of glasses with a big false nose and moustache attached. They left the shop and started to walk down the street. Jimmy reached into the bag, got out the glasses with nose and moustache and put them on. He looked very funny and so people started to point at him and laugh. Feeling embarrassed at all the attention they were attracting, the support worker using deafblind manual suggested that Jimmy should put the glasses, nose and moustache back in the bag. Jimmy thought for a moment and then said “No I think it’s funny and I want to wear it. I’m not worried, I can’t see them laughing and pointing at me.”

We might have the view that we need to be able to see and hear other people’s reactions, so that we can adjust our behaviour to fit in with what is acceptable in a social setting. Alternatively we might say that Jimmy and David are free of those constraints and are able to be more natural and less inhibited in their communication with others.

Let’s review the statement I made earlier.

“The quality of communication for someone who has sight and hearing impairment is inferior to that of someone who has both sight and hearing.”

We have focused on some aspects of communication that will be experienced differently by sighted hearing people and deafblind people. That is the important phrase –‘experienced differently’. Having a sensory loss doesn’t necessarily mean that the quality of communication will be inferior. In fact we have seen that sight and hearing could in some circumstances impair our interaction with others. That doesn’t mean that I am minimising the effect that deafblindness has on communication. The point that I am trying to make is that we cannot be categorical in our opinions. When we talk about diversity we often refer to disability and impairments, but surely diversity is about individuality

Returning to the introductory comments I made, communication is very complex, because of the lifetime of experiences that impact on how we perceive others and receive their messages. It is those

experiences, whether as a deafblind person or a sighted hearing person that makes us who we are. In the course of my work I have interacted with many people, in a variety of settings, using various communication methods. These have included many different characters some nice, some not so nice, some have been intelligent, strange, boring, interesting, awkward or amusing. Their diversity is more to do with their personality than any sensory loss. Based on what I have observed I am going to change my opening statement.

‘The quality of communication is chiefly affected by two things, the motivation to communicate and the relationship between the communicators.’

We recognise that there are sensory influences on communication but if someone wants to communicate and gets on well with the person, what matters is that they are making contact, building a relationship and enjoying each other’s company.

We have come to this conference to discuss the topic of communication. I am standing here looking out at all of you and I can see some old familiar faces, people from the UK and people from other countries that I have met at previous conferences. That’s fine, while I am looking forward to meeting up with old friends I will also be seeing a lot of people that I’ve never met before. Now, you could be strange, you could be amusing, you could be intelligent, I don’t know. I do know, however, that you have all had your own lifetime of experiences and I am motivated to want to communicate with you and get to know you. Let’s make it a goal of this conference on communication, not just to talk about it but to do it. Let’s take this opportunity to get to know each other.

To finish this part of the presentation I would like to share with you a compilation of sights and sounds of communication. It shows a variety of communication methods, different settings, different ages and genders but most of all it shows people enjoying themselves through communication.

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