



# What Goes Into Media Education?<sup>1</sup>

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## Ted Ward

What does an institutional plan for communication education of the future look like? I will not be suggesting answers built on particular, present models; I will, however, suggest guidelines for developing your own programs.

### **A Concept of Communication**

Purposeful communication is concerned with the function of ideas, information, and the transfer of information toward consequential behavioral goals. This conference has given us some notion of what the problems are, what the world dilemma is, what the resources are, and (I hope) we are getting a vision of what part we might play.

There's a communication revolution underway. The term refers to a functional societal change of the same magnitude as the industrial revolution. It isn't technology that is affecting the whole warp and woof of our society, as much as it is *communication*. The communication revolution is much more than machines, devices, and systems—the hardware and software. It is a shift in our point of view about information, about knowledge, about understanding. You can cancel your subscription, you can turn off the television, you can unplug the radio, you can do various things to cut yourself off from the artifacts of communication; but you can't isolate yourself from what the communication revolution is doing to society.

Parents see it particularly with reference to their children: the “generation gap” is, in fact, a communication shift representing a new way of life, a new style, a new set of value sources, far beyond the protective environment of the home as we have known it. The home, including the Christian home, has been fundamentally altered.

To understand the communication revolution you must come to terms with media and with theory. Media are the means. And these means have value in terms of their potential to elicit responses. The communication revolution is far more than a matter of the technology of media. It is, more basically, a matter of theory. Because it affects our theoretical view, especially as academicians and as designers, planners, and instrumenters of the media.

Without knowledge of theory, we are apt to be, at best, haphazard in utilization of the media. One of the most important and practical aspects of the theory of communication is in the use of feedback for refinement of communication. In refining any communication, there needs to be inquiry into what is happening in each of the elements in communication: you have a sender and a receiver. The sender is involved in preparing a message and transmitting it. What the receiver gets is nothing but a reception until he or she processes it through perceptions. These perceptions, of course, are intimately linked to his or her experiences. Without appropriate experience with which to “correct,” a message is apt to

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have only an inadequate or irrelevant meaning. The meaning comes from within the receiver. This proposition is not new, yet it is not widely understood. I am appalled to discover the number of undergraduates who have never considered the functional and foundational relationship of perception to learning, and hence to communication. If a receiver develops a meaning he is then in a position to provide some kind of feedback to the sender. If the sender is interested in refining the communication, she is interested in the feedback. Without feedback, the transmission may end with the reception and the sender never knows really what was received, nor does she know if any meaning was possible. If a feedback message is sent and received, there is next an inversion of the whole scheme. The feedback message reappears in the form of a reception by the sender, who, in turn, must process it into her perceptions ( which are necessarily limited by her experiences), form a meaning, make a message adjustment and transmit the message. This model of communication refinement through utilization of feedback is one of the most practical pieces of communication theory.

Whether the communicator is a freshman trying to learn to get along with his roommate, or a radio producer trying to reach a certain audience with a certain message, feedback theory can help with his problem! We need theory—sound, tested theory—not just accumulated sense and wisdom. Common sense and folk wisdom can lead communicators astray. For example, it seems like reasonable common sense to assume that mass communication serves primarily to influence toward new beliefs.

### **Mass Communication is Highly Useful to Influence Toward New Beliefs (Wrong!)**

This view is so common, especially among Christian communicators, that I feel I may be accused of heresy. But since two of yesterday's speakers already point out that there is some degree of fallacy in this folklore, I don't mind going on.

### **Mass Communication Tends to Reinforce Positions Already Held**

Empirical research shows that mass communication can reinforce the positions people already hold. If you are trying to induce change or decisions, mass communication alone is not necessarily the best way to do it, especially if you intend to push for closure in your first message. Common sense says that mass communication gets through to everyone.

### **Mass Communication Gets Through to Everyone (Wrong!)**

After all if you put a satellite over India, millions of people ought to be able to get it. Of course, you will want to import a few more television receivers. But that's the least of your worries! What will you do about the hundreds of languages in India? But even beyond that problem, research shows that the basic assumption is actually a fallacy. Empirical research shows that mass communication gets through best to those already biased toward your message.

### **Mass Communication Gets Through to Certain People, as Individuals**

There is a certain amount of futility involved in mass communications; so be it. Common sense says that if you want to know if your message got through, *ask* people.

### **If You Want to Know if Your Message Got Through, Ask People (Wrong!)**

Ask them, did my message get through? From the point of view of responsible research, self-report data are almost useless.

### **If You Want To Know If Your Message Got Through, Watch People**

If you really want to know what part of your message actually went through, it is far better to take a look at what people *do* as a consequence of the message.

Appropriate training to bring a person into competency in communication leadership can be divided into five sectors. These five sectors are not sequential; they are interlocked and essentially simultaneous. Some of them are mutually dependent.

**Training Task 1: Comprehensive scope is essential for insightful communication.**

If you do not have persons who have been liberally educated, in the sense of the freedom of their insight and viewpoint, you do not begin with people who are comprehensive in their scope. You have people whose communication competencies will not be useful, no matter what the level of their technical skill. The communication leader, designer, planner, manager or educator needs a comprehensive view of life. Perhaps this sounds like a “liberal arts college view,” and to some extent it is, but the concept must be updated because there are several assumptions inherent in the old liberal arts view that are out-of-date. For example, the view that during the course of a four-year collegiate experience, students can truly wrap themselves around all the things they will ever need to know has become somewhat impractical. Today it is more realistic to attempt to learn how to go about coping with new information, new knowledge and new problems. The communicator needs to develop a kind of inquiring lifestyle, and needs to develop a competency in handling information. The communicator needs a habit, based on the practice of continuing to learn.

**Training Task 2: Communicators must be inquirers into human processes; behavioral science provides the basis.**

Although students can learn certain specific skills, in this era they are virtually condemned to obsolescence within five to ten years if they cannot move beyond those skills. There are few skills that can be used to make a livelihood for an entire career. Education must instead provide a clinical style—impart a behavioral view and coping strategy that allows students to so perceptively comprehend what people are like, what they are doing with information, knowledge and ideas, that he or she can keep re-tuning skills to the realities found as the future unfolds. One of the problems with parents and pastors, is that they are unable to cope with the new stances they find in young people. It is very clear that regardless of the particular bias we are talking about, whether fundamentalist, liberal, Catholic, or Protestant, young people today are presenting pastors, parents, employers, and educators with a whole new set of problems. And in many instances, the parents, pastors, and so on, are not able to cope with these because nowhere in their educational experience did they have a real focus on how to learn about people. One reason that missionaries are often more perceptive of the American scene today than are the people who are at work in it, is that missionaries must attune themselves to cross-cultural problems. The perceptive missionary knows that you have to learn about people by watching and interacting. You use the data that you see in order to formulate new hypotheses about how to interact; and your interaction provides the tests of the hypotheses.

**Training Task 3: Knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of the major media forms requires “hands-on” experience.**

Communicators need specific knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of the major media forms and they have to get this through “hands-on” experience. I’m not convinced that you learn much about the use of television by watching it. You need to *produce* it. I don’t think you learn much about films by observing. You learn about films by producing them. We need, in media, people who are both technically skilled and theoretically knowledgeable people who have a high degree of “hands on” experience, really aware of the limitations inherent in the media and in the potential inherent in the media. A parallel can be drawn from the invention and development of the wheel. No matter how crude, a wheel is an important alternative to dragging carcasses around by the ears. Friction, you see, was one of the first problems that humans had to deal with in their development of the technological

view of their problems in life. The wheel came along, but the wheel did not surmount the problem of friction. The wheel has an inherent characteristic of producing friction. So lubrication was the next technology added to the wheel; but still the friction lingered on. The metal axle provided yet another gain. Much further down the line, bearings were invented. Bearings, grease, steel axle, we use them all.

But if you have an automobile you still have the probability that friction is going to wear out those bearings! There is an inherent limitation in virtually every technological device. The most creative people are those who start with an informed view of both the limitations and the potentialities, so that they do not become discouraged down the road by what they simply cannot make the media do. They start off with *freedom* because they have already come to grips with limitations.

**Training Task 4: Field experiences involve the trainee in the “reality dimensions” (the feel) of the applied arts of communication.**

Field experience is an essential part of a quality training program for producing professionals in the media. Perhaps most of the operational skills of the media can be learned most effectively in a field experience. I think it is rather silly to hold classroom sessions on technical aspects related to the use of devices. As part of their assignments, people need to learn to deal with the artifacts of media.

**Training Task 5: Relating of cognitive learning and field experiences requires interactive seminars.**

Relating of cognitive learning and field experiences requires interactive seminars. I refer you to “The Rail Fence Analogy for the Education of Professionals” which was developed from work Sam Rowen and I did related to the analyses of professional curriculum for the education of medical practitioners. In the “Rail Fence” view of the curriculum there is a shift from intense dependency on the classroom to an integration between three functions: A flow of cognitive studies, a flow of field experiences, and the whole thing tied together by periodic seminars. In this sense, the word *seminar* has a distinct meaning. It means far more than simply a small class. It has to do with a conscious focus on integrating—holding together and relating the cognitive and the experiential. The speaker this morning suggested that unless we provide for effective seminars, field experiences can run away with the whole curriculum and produce a shoddy scholarship. A proper perspective and relationship must be kept between the “know” and the “do.” This is the major function of a seminar.

These five training tasks, then, constitute the elements of a curriculum. One footnote with reference to task two: communicators must be inquirers into human processes. Theory of behavior change is basic to effective design and effective evaluation of communication; I don’t think there is anyway around that. Communicators need to have their basis, less in the hard sciences, more in the behavioral sciences. But even in behavioral science fields as usually taught, there is a problem: we must have people who come through with something more than the residual data of previous psychological and sociological inquiries. The emphasis is so much on what has been learned about people that the student gets little perception of how it was learned. Thus the courses are backward-oriented and inadequate for a future-oriented planner. What is needed is a view of how a psychologist or sociologist inquires into what people are like. Students need to become part of that inquiry process. Today’s student needs to develop skills of inquiry so that he or she can redirect efforts and inquire into today’s situations. As we educate Christian behavioral scientists, we raise up Christian communicators. I cannot see any fundamental distinction between the two. It is *absolutely more important that the communicator know something about the nature of inquiry processes in the behavioral sciences.*

## Students

What kinds of students apply for media education? I'd like to suggest three criteria for the selection and training of communicators: *objectivity, sensitivity and creativity*. Objectivity is suggested as a criterion in the sense that we need people who are precise, systematic and evaluative; people who are hard-headed to the point where they are not unduly influenced even by their own hopes. We need people of faith who also have keenly critical eyes on what they find around them.

In reference to sensitivity, what we need here is empathy; we find excellent models in the biblical descriptions of Christ working with his disciples and the people around him; the kind of sensitivity that produces awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the validity of culture. What I mean by "cross-cultural" concerns those matters of cultural difference that will divide human beings if they do not perceive the validity and reasonableness in alternative customs, styles, and modes of expression. The problem of cross-cultural communication is one that you have to deal with in any audience at any time. I believe that international experience is one of the best ways to quickly become aware of the importance of cultural difference in communication and I strongly urge that a communication curriculum in a first-class institution involve extended experiences in a distinct sub-culture or another culture across national boundaries.

The kind of creativity needed is both adaptive and innovative. The lack of finances can make us adaptive; we can always find ways to make do. But I'm not sure it makes us truly innovative. If we value creativity we do not make exact copies. Creativity that feeds innovation and reflects excitement and celebration is sure to be more expansive.

## Institutional Commitment

In order to get into the mainstream of action, the Christian institution has to become part of the larger picture, including the secular realms of communication. Many of the better field experiences that our students need are found in secular environments. Much of the cultural experience of the communication revolution involves the secular environment. Institutional commitments must involve secular cooperation of three sorts. First for field experiences, second for shared research (if we cut ourselves off from research because it doesn't come from within our own little group, we deprive ourselves of some very important insights); third, for shared faculties (some of the best scholars and practitioners of communication are not in the Christian college). In terms of how you relate to communication within the next ten years, you are going to have to incorporate shared faculty and shared experiences. Some of the emerging institutes of film making, for example, have found ways to integrate people who are not within the evangelical sub-culture into their operations—and apparently without any terribly grave consequences. 'Take courage!' Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world," is still in the Word of God!

Institutional commitment involves money. Communication and media are expensive fields. It is easy to make mistakes, especially in the technological investments. For example, I am counseling people now not to invest heavily in videotape recording equipment (except for "instant replay" uses for faculty and students where the tape itself is a disposable or temporal thing and can be phased out after a week or ten days of heavy use.) Tape life is too short, the wear on pick-up heads is too great. Some of our operating costs are running four to six times our estimates of five years ago. The use of a particular video replay of a program for one student at a time is economically questionable. Electronic video recording (the CBS-Motorola System EVR) is much more promising. Please don't pick up that one little isolated tidbit and conclude that videotape is out. All I am saying in this one illustration is that it is possible to make some unfortunate investments that in the long run will turn out to be

mistakes, partly because the technology is in a state of flux. But unless the management of the institution is willing to invest money, you are not going to get very far in expanding media education. Further, unless you have a faculty and students who are willing to relate themselves to theory, who are willing to discipline themselves to the more hard-headed behavioral science views of communication, media education isn't apt to be worth much for your students anyway. I am convinced that *nothing is more practical than good theory* and that in our quest for good practical experience, we've sometimes adopted experiences so lacking in attention to theory that they are practical only for today, maybe for tomorrow, certainly not beyond that.

I'd like to end my presentation with an apology. This presentation may have lent credibility to a fallacious view of communication itself. What I have said here today suggests that the primary message of the communication revolution is that our educational institutions must have departments of communication and offer communication courses. I don't want to be heard as saying that. Certainly, the communication revolution demands that *some* institutions move quickly and skillfully to produce the leaders and specialists needed within the communication-related functions of the church. But the communication revolution is bigger than that; and the message of the communication revolution for *every* institution is not to build a communication department, but rather to examine the entire educational institution and recognize that the young people you are dealing with are involved in the new world of communication. Every faculty member, every administrator, is affected by the communication revolution. They need to re-examine the kind of Christ they are communicating and build their courses, their departments, their colleges, into a communication experience for themselves, their colleagues, and their students. Christian communication is not only a job for specialists; *communication is every Christian's business.*