Aspects of Communication in Romanian Higher Education

Corina – Ionela Dumitrescu*, Dan Diulescu**

* University Politehnica of Bucharest, Splaiul Independenţei 313, Bucureşti
  e-mail: iordache@philos.pub.ro

** Pforzheim University, Tiefenbronner Str. 65, D-75175 Pforzheim, Germany
  e-mail: aaa@hs-pforzheim.de

Abstract

School is an organization. For this reason, firstly, this paper focuses on the application of certain aspects regarding organization of communication in the academic field.

Secondly, an aspect of originality of this paper is the impartial analysis of the professor-student communication in universities, emphasizing the barriers to efficient communication.

Thirdly, the paper offers a SWOT analysis for communication in Romanian higher education.

Key words: *organizational communication, educational communication, barriers to communication, SWOT analysis*

Introduction

Two important aspects may be mentioned when defining communication: the content of communication activity and the fact that communication is a process. Undoubtedly, interhuman communication is developing permanently and continuously; individuals begin with their own experience and the things they know and they assimilate new knowledge which will be the basis for future knowledge and so on. As a result, they advance in knowledge. [1] Adler and Rodman (1991, pp.5) compare communication with a film in full swing whose meaning comes from interrelated images.

Moreover, human communication is done in complex systems and languages, by gestures, standardised affective expressions, actions and attitudinal behaviours, etc. [10] Therefore, communication is done by codes with symbolic and conventional character. Of course, this code has to be learnt by each and every person through an active and a selective assimilation process which goes to an individual system with a common basis for all interlocutors.

We speak about communication but especially about its efficiency in politics, business, negotiation processes, public relations and institutions. [15]

There are many studies and papers which emphasize superior – subordinate communication in all kinds of organizations. [6, 16]

The barriers to an efficient communication are also thoroughly discussed in important studies and papers in this field of knowledge. [13, 12, 3, 9]

This paper focuses on a delicate subject, namely academic communication between professor and his students. Why delicate? Because from our point of view, this field of activity is a domain where people talk much, but communication is not always efficient. Professors and their students are seldom partners in the communication process, students being often treated like professors' subordinates.

School is an organization. For that reason this paper begins with certain *considerations* regarding the organizational communication:

1. Is the relationship professor – student framed in a hierarchical circuit?
2. What is a good communication between professors and their students?
3. Which are the deficiencies of the professor – student communication?
4. Which are the barriers to an efficient academic communication?
5. Can we build a SWOT analysis for the educational communication?

The questions mentioned above are the objectives of this paper and we try to find their answers in its structure.

The complexity and the vastness of the theme impose an explanation which comes in earnest.We do not pretend either to analyze all the aspects of the subject or to say things which are totally new, but to apply aspects regarding the organizational communication in the academic field. The main idea sustained in this paper is that of "the decentralization of the didactics", in the sense of the valuation of both the dialogue and the participation that take place within the educational activity.

To educate means to add new data to the intimate side of the student, to fight with what is redundant, to make the students forget the "noxious" habits. The real intervention of the professor and the initiative of the student have to harmonise with each other, the professor helping his students to find their own way. Communication, especially language, assures the support strictly necessary to the educational act. Communication implies the association of the cognitive and affective elements in order to transmit information, to induce beliefs and emotions or to make behaviours more evident. Didactic communication is an instrumental one, directly involved in sustaining a systemic learning process. We do not call it didactic because professors and students are involved in it; the two actors may be two students, a book and an individual who learns something, a parent and a child, the initiate and the disciples.

Communication is the process through which information is exchanged between the sender and the receiver. This simple definition is large enough to cover a great variety of information exchanges.

The Basis of Organizational Communication

Communication on the Hierarchical Circuit

The lines from the organizational chart are the lines of authority and relationships of reports. Theoretically, communication in an organization should strictly follow the hierarchical circuit. Three necessary forms of communication can be accomplished in this system:

o   Up – down communication in which the informational flow circulates from the top level to the base of the organization;
o   Down – up communication, in which the informational flow circulates from the base to the top level of the organization;
o   The horizontal communication in which the informational flow circulates between departments or functional units from the same hierarchical level, usually as coordinative means of effort.

It is clear that a great part of the organizational communication follows the formal lines of authority from the organizational chart. This thing is valid especially for the up – down and down – up communication, for example: directives and instructions usually go down on the hierarchical circuit and the ideas and proposals, on the contrary, go up. However, the reality of communication in organizations shows that formal hierarchical circuit is an incomplete and often inefficient way of communication.

Deficiencies in the Hierarchical Circuit

Managers recognize that adhering strictly to the hierarchical circuit is often inefficient.

The absence of informal communication

Hierarchical circuit does not take into consideration the informal communication between the members of that hierarchy. Secret information which is put into circulation is simply informal communication. Of course, not all informal messages are good for the organization. Gossip exchange market may spread incorrect news, all over the organization, often with "doubtful taste".

The informal professor – student communication is almost totally absent in the Romanian education. Few professors give their students an e-mail address or their personal phone number so that the informal communication channels could be open.

Filtration

Through filtration, the suitable persons are often impeded to get the suitable information. Filtration is the tendency to dilute or to stop at a certain moment the message on the way to the receiver. Filtration is like a double edged sword. On the one hand, it is expected that workers do not inform their superiors about any insignificant event from their working place. On the other hand, a too zelous filtration will obstruct people to get certain information. As it is said, "information is power"; therefore, some managers apply the top – down filtration of information in order to maintain their power before their subordinates. For example, a leader who feels that a subordinate may be promoted above its own professional level would filter essential information in order to make his subordinate present himself improperly in a personnel meeting.

Evidently, the filtering actions' potential develops together with the increase in the number of the links in the communication chain. For that reason, individuals search for additional chains besides those established through the hierarchical circuit. For example, many managers develop an "open doors policy" in which any member of the organization may communicate directly, without passing through the whole hierarchical circuit. [17, 14]

Such policy reduces the bottom – up filtration of the delicate information, to the extent to which the employees trust the system. Moreover, in order to prevent the top – down filtration, many organizations try to communicate directly with the possible receivers, avoiding the hierarchy.

In universities, filtration appears when some professors "forget" to transmit certain information to their students. As we have mentioned above, information is power. Professors have the power and the students are often considered their subordinates. This inefficiency might be removed through some debate lectures, with questions asked by the students which determine the professors to transmit all the information they have.

Slowness

Even when information is transmitted honestly through the hierarchical circuit, the process might be unimaginably slow. Through the formal circuit, the horizontal communication between departments may be even slower than the vertical one.

The slowness in professor – student communication happens because of the great number of the students a professor has in a series.

To draw a conclusion, the informal communication as well as the recognition of the filtration phenomenon together with the lack of time represent the guarantee that school will develop communication channels besides those in the hierarchical order.

Professor – Student Communication: A Superior – Subordinate Communication?

Communication between a leader and a subordinate is an informational exchange between a person from a superior hierarchical level and his subordinates. Ideally, this exchange should make the leader direct his subordinates to fulfil their tasks, to clarify the context of reward and to offer social and emotional support. Moreover, he should allow the subordinates to ask questions about the role of their labour and to make proposals which promote the objectives of the company. A survey on 32000 employees from United States and Canada asked them to arrange the sources of information from their organization according to both their preferences and the real situation. As we see in Table 1, the direct superior is both the current source for most information as well as the preferred one. [6] Moreover, the perception that leaders have of the communication capacity positively correlates with the organization performances. Therefore, for any organization, a good superior – subordinate communication becomes desirable. [15]

Table 1. Sources of information in the organizations

The classification according to preferences	Sources of information	The classification according to the real situation
1	Direct leader	1
2	Small groups meetings	4
3	Managers	11
4	Employee's Textbook / Booklets	3
5	Informational bulletin of the department	8
6	Orientation programmes	12
7	Informational bulletin of the company	6
8	Annual report of the company	7
9	The bulletin of the administration	5
10	Up communication programme	14
11	Trade union	9
12	Large groups meetings	10
13	Audio – video programmes	15
14	Mass media	13
15	Gossip exchange market	2

Source: Foltz, R.G. - *Communication in Contemporary Organizations*, in C. Reuss & D. Silvis (Eds,), Inside Organizational Communication (2nd edition), New York, Longman, pp. 10, 1985

In our universities, professors often behave as leaders and treat their students as subordinates. In our opinion this approach must be changed in the learning process. Any student's question has to be respectfully treated, and the answer has to come simply without maliciousness or irony, no matter how naive the question might be. But we all know that this thing depends on the personality of each and every individual.

How Good Is the Professor – Student Communication?

An index for good communication is both the extent to which a professor agrees with his students about school problems and the degree in which each and everyone is sensitive to each other. Though it is possible that "all parties agree that they do not agree" to all issues, only extreme and persistent differences become problematical. Professors and students often perceive the following *aspects* in a different manner:

o   The way in which students spend their time versus the way they should do;
o   How long it takes to learn something;
o   How important the motivation is for a student;
o   The professional capacity of a student;
o   The performances of a student and the obstacles he has to pass;
o   The teaching style of the professor. [8, 5, 7]

These differences suggest a lack of openness in communication which can contribute a lot to the conflict roles, especially from the sudents' point of view. Moreover, the lack of an open communication reduces the work satisfaction of the students.

Barriers to the Efficient Professor – Student Communication

Which are the causes for a bad professor – student communication?

Together with the essential differences of personality and perception, the following factors go to an inefficient communication between professors and their students:

Conflict demands of the role

The leader role of the professor requires him to fulfil both job functions and social emotional support, as well. In other words, he has to coordinate the students' work and pay attention to the soul's needs and desires at the same time. Many professors have difficulties in balancing these two demands of their role. For example, let's discuss the following note sent by a professor to a student who won a prize at a scientific debate:

„Congratulations on your winning the first prize at the scientific debate. You may be very proud for this achievement. I hope you will be able to have the same results next year, too. In fact, the increase of the prize number is the key for student success."

The professor tries to fulfil both his job and emotional functions at the same time. He congratulates his student and suggests that he should improve his performances within the same text. Unfortunately, this student would feel offended of this communication episode because he would think that it takes from his merits. In this case, two separate statements would be more appropriate: one for congratulations and one for directives and expected results.

Hiding bad news effect

Another factor which inhibits the efficient communication between professor and his students is the effect of hiding bad news. We all tend to avoid transmitting bad news. [16] People rather protect other people than bring bad news which might provoke negative reactions from the receiver. For example, doctors often hesitate to tell their patients the diagnosis of incurable disease.

As in the example above, there is no need for the sender to be responsible for the bad news in order to produce the desired effect. For that reason, the effect of hiding bad news is more likely to come up when the sender is really responsible for the bad news.

Students who really want very good marks often have communication problems with their professors. [13] We could explain this as follows: students who want to impress their professors in order to get the highest mark have powerful reasons to keep the bad news. [3, 12]

We see this effect not only in students. It is possible that professors hesitate to communicate the bad news, too. Within an organization, the employees who are more productive have higher chances to be informed about the way they are seen by others. Evidently, some professors sometimes hesitate to transmit their students that they did not pass the exam as they themselves evaluate their activities. All things considered, it is not surprising that professors and their students have different perceptions regarding the activity of the latter. [7, 2]

The effect of the function status

The third obstacle in the efficiency of communication is the professors' tendency to assign too little value to the communication with their students. The status of the members from a group affects the way communication occurs, always expressing the desire to communicate with people having either the same status or a superior one. Sometimes communication with students may be perceived negatively by some professors because they see their students as being at an inferior level. It is the wrong perception according to which the professor is the leader and the student is the subordinate.

In a survey for testing this hypothesis the managers were asked to record every communication episode in which they were implied during their work for a week. [9, 17] They were asked to describe their attitude regarding each and every episode, the way of communication and the identification of the other party. The results of this survey showed the clear tendency of the managers to interpret favourably the episodes with superiors in comparison with those with subordinates. Undoubtedly, at a certain moment, subordinates understand these negative reactions and stop the information flows which finally lead to the decreasing of the communication efficiency inside the organization.

Time

The last but not the least obstacle for a good professor – student communication is simply the lack of time. Professor – student communication is verbal. At first sight it sounds generous enough: students would receive a great part of their professors' work time. But there is a trap here. Imagine that most professors have more than 100 students in a series. Thus, a simple ratio shows that each and every student receives too little from their professors' daily work time.

There are studies that show that communication between a superior and a subordinate lasts 4 minutes daily on an average within an organization! [11] In the Romanian universities this time is even less when we talk about the communication professor – one student. Given this simple calculus it is not surprising that professors perceive the conversations with their students as being more frequent than students do. [4]

SWOT Analysis for Professor – Student Communication

Both the problems within the didactic process and the measures for their elimination may be identified through this method. In the activity with students, the method may be used at different moments of time: to evoke previous knowledge, to get new knowledge, to enhance it, etc. It may be applied individually, in pairs, in small groups, etc

Table 2. SWOT analysis for professor – student communication in the higher Romanian education

STRENGHTS	WEAKNESSES
o Democratic communication; o The possibility of electronic communication between professor and his students; o The access of the students to modern technologies (sometimes); o Students might solve their problems by their tutor's help; o Students are encouraged to participate in national and international scientific debates.	o Students' lack of interest; o Unfavourable conditions for developing efficient didactic activities (insufficient number of the classrooms, obsolete laboratory equipments, etc); o Weak motivation for professors to develop both efficient and attractive for their students; o Professors use an "not understandable" language for their students; o The lack of abilities for the themes approached within the lectures; o The lack of socio – emotional communication between professors and their students.

Table 2 (cont.)

OPORTUNITIES	THREATS
o Getting new knowledge; o Flexibility regarding the work time of the students; o The possibility for students to propose a way of developing the didactic activities; o Different ways which professors may adopt to put at students' disposal the used didactic materials.	o External causes which might go to the loss or shortage of the information transmitted from the professor to his students; o The insufficiency of modern technologies for the efficient development of the didactic activities (obsolete laboratory equipment, inexistence of some chemical substances in some laboratories, insufficient number of computers, etc.) o Restructuring the whole higher education in Bologna variant without efficient rethinking of the teaching plans and programmes; o The prevalence of the written exams as students' evaluation way; o The migration of valuable professors either to universities abroad or outside the education – they have financial motivations most of the times.

As we see in Table 2, the strengths and opportunities for the efficiency in professor – student communication "turn pale" in front of its weaknesses and threats.

Conclusions

As we have mentioned in the content of this paper, education is a field of activity where people talk. But communication is not always optimal because the communication process involves more than a simple transmission of information from professor to his students and assimilation by the students of this information.

The communication process in the academic field has to be perceived as a mixture of attitudes, dignified appearance, interactivity and scholar psychology as well.

From our point of view, informal educational communication is very important. A discussion site between professors and their students might open the informal communication channels.

Studying some important Romanian universities' sites (University „Politehnica" of Bucharest, University of Bucharest, The Academy of Economic Studies, Ecological University of Bucharest, University „Titu Maiorescu", University „Spiru Haret", University „Lucian Blaga" of Sibiu, University of Craiova, Petroleum – Gas University of Ploieşti, West University of Timişoara) we have observed that only three of these (University „Spiru Haret", University „Lucian Blaga" of Sibiu, Petroleum – Gas University of Ploieşti) have in the site map a discussion page where both students and professors may make proposals, suggestions, or even express personal opinions about any subject they are interested in.

In our opinion, in order to increase the efficiency of the communication process in higher education, we have to introduce the transactional perspective of communication: we are both senders and receivers in the communicational interaction (the spiral theory).

Thus the exchange of actions and reactions is replaced with the systemic simultaneity of the answers. Therefore, we are the product of all previous communications. To isolate a fragment of this spiral would mean to alter the essence of the communication process.

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Aspecte ale comunicării în învăţământul superior românesc

Rezumat

Şcoala reprezintă o organizaţie. De aceea, în primul rând, acest articol abordează aplicarea anumitor aspecte privind comunicarea organizaţională în domeniul academic.

În al doilea rând, aspectul de originalitate al acestui articol este dat de analiza imparţială a comunicării profesor-student în universităţi, subliniind barierele în calea unei comunicări eficiente.

În al treilea rând, articolul conţine o analiză SWOT efectuată asupra comunicării specifice învăţământului superior românesc.