

Is Delivering the Discourse a Determinant Factor for Student Engagement?

VALENTINA MIHAELA GHINEA

UNESCO Department for business administration
The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
Calea Grivitei, No. 2-2A, Bucharest
ROMANIA
valentina_ghinea@yahoo.com

SHAHRAZAD HADAD

UNESCO Department for business administration
The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
Calea Grivitei, No. 2-2A, Bucharest
ROMANIA

ALINA MIHAELA DIMA

UNESCO Department for business administration
The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
Calea Grivitei, No. 2-2A, Bucharest
ROMANIA

Abstract: - Professor – student communication is one of the most important aspects of the teaching process. For the effectiveness of the teaching process, efforts should be carried out by both of the parties involved, by fulfilling the following two conditions: on the one hand professors should share knowledge with their students, and on the other hand the students should assimilate the lessons and internalize it. Thus, we posit that delivering the discourse plays a special role in triggering students' attention and engagement.

As proven by the research in the field, the direct structuring of the message is more appropriate when a positive reaction is expected from the interlocutor, while its indirect structuring is more likely to be used in the case of a skeptical audience or of an audience that may be reluctant to the message conveyed.

In order to find out which is the most appropriate way of structuring the message when addressing Romanian students, we resorted to three experiments, each of them conducted on a sample of 30 students from the same university. The first experiment used a direct psychological structure of an unpopular message, the second experiment used an indirect psychological structure of the message, whereas the last experiment used a direct psychological structured message reinforced by an item of psychological manipulation.

The results of our experiments showed the Romanian students' propensity for the direct message, contrary to the expectations fueled by the specialists in the field. Apparently, the Romanian young audience involved in the experiments is not so receptive to indirect messages, especially to the ones starting with buffers, hence, we can use these findings for improving the teaching - evaluation processes, in particular, and students' engagement, in general.

Key-Words: - delivering discourse, direct message, indirect message, students' engagement, consistency principle, authority principle, manipulation.

1 Introduction

The essence of communication is providing data, information and impressions that are beneficial for the people with whom we communicate. No matter the quest, our success mainly depends on our ability to communicate. Even if the definition of communication engenders continuing controversy as

definitions generally do, all the attempts, regardless of their level of complexity, come in the end to a common ground. Therefore, the focus can be: on the ensemble of ways, means and mediums that make available a multitude of messages to the large public [11], on the process of transmitting the information

to a receiver, or on the human interaction that allows people to understand each other [1].

Over time, communication barriers arouse the interest of scientists by becoming a niche of research. These barriers interfere and disrupt the message. Among the most common ones we mention: noise and distractions (internal – thoughts, emotions, etc., and external – street noise, ticking clocks, barking dogs, highlighting in this way the importance of the place where communication happens) [3], concurrent messages (overloading the audience with information and reducing their capacity of distinguishing between useful and useless information) [6], filters (each individual has his/her own reality which influences the way he/she perceives the message) [12], and nevertheless accidents within the communication channel (misplacing letters in the mailing system, the person with the attribution of delivering the message either forgets to deliver it, or delivers it to another receiver and the list may continue) [2].

Related to each individual perception and articulation, the results of Korzybski's and Mehrabian's research have a significant importance [10, 13] meaning that, if properly used by the addresser, all the filters (neurological, socio-cultural and individual) and processes (generalization, distortion and selection) that might arise during the formulation of the message, together with the verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal languages ensuring the expression of ideas and feelings, finally leads to the desired outcome. According to Constantinescu-Stefanel, para-verbal language includes verbal flow, voice intensity, voice pitch, intonation, accent, while non-verbal language includes proxemics, haptics, oculosics, olfactics, kinetics, clothing, and chronemics [5].

Taking into consideration the communication purposes and relying on an analysis of the audience, the addresser has to decide upon the psychological structure of the message. The addresser may choose between the direct and indirect approaches. If the *direct approach* is recommended when waiting for a positive reaction of the audience regarding the message, the *indirect approach* is more likely to be used in case of skeptical audiences or of an audience reluctant to the transmitted message. [1]

According to Popescu et al., the main difference between the two approaches is a structural one, as the direct approach is an "a priori speech", while the indirect approach is an "a posteriori" one. [15] Therefore, *the direct message* firstly mentions the conclusions assuming they are accepted by the audience, suitable for routine messages, while *the indirect message* starts by stating the logical

arguments, enabling the audience to check these arguments in such a manner that they turn out to be self-convinced by the truthfulness of the arguments – which furthermore facilitates accepting the conclusion. Hence, the indirect structure of the message would be a more appropriate choice when delivering negative messages.

Still, how can we explain that messages with similar informational content may lead to opposite reactions of the audience by just simply changing the sequence in which the information is presented?

Research in the field has shown that the information generated by the individual himself is more likely to be retained than the information presented to him [7], [9]. Related to the psychological structuring of the message, the direct message aims to persuade by means of information provided by the emitter, while an indirect message addresses the deductive reasoning of the receiver. Thereupon, the beliefs acquired through deductive reasoning are considered to persist longer than those delivered by somebody through direct messages.

When seeking the acceptance of a negative message with a sensitive content, Roebuck recommends structuring the message in a special way [16]. Thus, not only she considers the indirect psychological structure, but she also thinks of different buffers for alleviating or moderating the tension. While a direct formulation roughly starts with the clear description of the bad news, it continues by presenting the causes that led to the negative event, and, preferably, ends in a positive manner, the indirect psychological approach does it conversely. Moreover, the buffer which is a neutral and balanced phrase closely connected to the idea of the message becomes, in Roebuck's vision, compulsory meaning to show that the emitter perfectly understands the needs of the receiver. Therefore, an appropriate buffer is respectful, relevant, neutral, and ensures a smooth transition towards the rest of the message [16].

2 Problem formulation

The educational process entails human interaction, which has communication as a fundamental dimension weighed against two conditions: professors sharing knowledge with their students, and students assimilating and internalizing the lessons. Ergo, the purpose of chief importance that every professor has relates to getting students' attention and engaging them in a full diversity of activities.

In this vein, the dual-process theories of reasoning (people make decisions by firstly relying

on their intuition, and afterwards, on logical reasoning) can be useful [14][17], and even Cialdini's six fundamental psychological principles governing the human behavior (reciprocity, consistency, checking, connection, authority, and withholding) [4].

Under the threat of omnipresent stimuli (phones, Internet of Things and all other smart devices), we face a laborious task while trying to encourage students' attention and engagement, and therefore we decided to find the most appropriate way of conceiving a message when addressing students. Should we approach them directly or treat them in a more diplomatic way, buffering all the unpopular or negative measures, decisions or news? Or, even better, imposing them our own decisions, and, if so, to what extent that could be used without causing frustration and disagreement? We conducted this research due to our strong belief in the necessity of delivering a message customized based on the recipients' features, since what is proven as an appropriate method in general, is not necessarily an effective one for every cluster of students, or for each individual. This is a matter dependent on the organizational culture, the characteristics of each generation, field of activity, etc. However, the teaching style, the message delivering, as well as the preferred methods for student evaluation basically depend on the professor's personal features. Theoretically, a good professor adapts to the audience's needs, basing his decisions and teaching on the feedback provided by the students [8], whereas, practically, only few teachers go beyond merely conveying the information while also paying attention to the way they transmit it as to be understood by and adapted to the individuals of the audience.

3 Research Methodology

In the light of the presented premises, we formulated the following two research hypotheses:

H1: *The message with an indirect psychological structure is more effective than the one with a direct psychological structure.*

H2: *The message effectiveness is enhanced when supported by a psychological manipulation factor.*

In order to test these hypotheses, we conducted an experimental study within The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Over 90 subjects randomly chosen, independent of their age, gender and the faculty they attended, were informed of an imminent Rubella epidemics and the urgent need of preventing the infection by taking precautionary

actions (such as wearing disposable shoe covers for protection). The subjects were divided into three experimental groups: the first two groups were presented a message with similar information content, but with different psychological structures, while the third group was presented the same message but with an additional item of psychological manipulation.

The objectives of the study were to:

- O₁. evaluate the effectiveness of the message in the context of direct psychological structures;
- O₂. evaluate the effectiveness of the message in the context of indirect psychological structures;
- O₃. compare the outcomes of direct and indirect messages;
- O₄. evaluate the influence of the consistency principle (between thoughts and actions) during and over the subjects' decision process;
- O₅. evaluate the influence of the authority principle during and over the subjects' decision process.

During the experiments, we manipulated three triggering factors: F₁ – the psychological structure of the message; F₂ - the visual element meant to activate the authority principle among subjects; F₃ - the ending statement propitious for the manifestation of the consistency principle among subjects.

The conversion of the psychological structure of the message (from direct into indirect), was meant to reveal its most effective structure when getting and keeping students' attention and enhancing their conformity. Therefore, the first group of students, G₁, and the second, G₂, were tested related to their reactions. The third group, G₃, was meant to verify the occurrence of authority principle (direct psychological structure of the message reinforced by a psychological manipulation item). As for the consistency principle, this was encouraged/spurred and registered in all the three cases because of the ending request asking them to *buy the plastic shoe covers*.

The message for the first group used the direct psychological structure: *“Hello! The university management has decided today that all the people entering the buildings must wear protection shoe covers! The Bucharest Public Health Department has issued a Rubella risk warning, so that the university management made this decision for preventing the spreading of germs and minimizing the contamination risk. These shoe covers cost 50 eurocents.”*

The second group was addressed by using the following indirect psychological structure of the message: *«Hello! Do you care about your health? The university management shares the same opinion*

(that health is important). *Today, the university management was notified about the Rubella epidemic risk. Therefore, it was decided that all people entering the buildings should be asked to wear shoe covers. These shoe covers cost 50 eurocents.*"

In the third case, G₃ was subjected to a completely different approach (direct psychological structure reinforced by the item of psychological manipulation): *"Hello! We are volunteers representing Dr. Victor Babeş Clinical Hospital. The university management has decided today that all the people entering the buildings must wear protection shoe covers! The Bucharest Public Health Department has issued a Rubella risk warning, so that the university management made this decision for preventing the spreading of germs and minimizing the risk of contamination. These shoe covers cost 50 eurocents."*

In order to test the first hypothesis, we did not set the experimental and control group, as they both were subject to a psychological structure, irrespective of its type, while with regards to the second hypothesis, we compared the findings of the first group (which was the control group) with the findings within the third group (experimental group). We therefore recorded the fluctuation in the number of subjects eager to wear plastic shoe covers or the number of subjects willing to pay for them.

Although largely used in medical institutions for overcoming dirt accumulation and bacteria spread, plastic shoe covers are inefficient in Rubella epidemics, as this is caused by the Rubella virus, which spreads through droplets of fluids when coughing or sneezing. We considered Sloman's dual process theory (1996) [16], and we imagined subjects become aware of this fact (if they eventually will), only after the experiment will have been taken place.

Initially, they are foreseen to associate the protection shoe covers with the medical field, so that they will not question the effectiveness of this caution measure. Deliberately, we did not resort to protection masks or vaccine campaigns (far more adequate in this case), precisely to increase the relevance of the experiments.

The transmitted message is a negative one, since subjects are informed about an imminent health risk. Moreover, they are urged to take actions that put them out of their comfort zone. The message is also a persuasive one not only because it aims at changing the behavior of the audience (never before had students worn plastic shoe covers within the university), but also because it meets the AIDA criteria: a) attention-drawn (by the news regarding

the health risk); b) interest – triggered by the provided solution (plastic shoe covers); c) desire – they all want to preserve good health conditions; d) action – it is sufficient wearing protection shoe covers (low effort) for preventing the disease spread (major benefit).

For full advantages in recording the respondents' reactions when gradually disclosing the message, we resorted to face-to-face discussions. In all three situations, safety shoe covers were worn by the message transmitters, and only in the third case they were all dressed in white medical coats, so that to check the influence of the authority principle (doctors have authority in the medical field and this authority is associated with the white medical coats that they wear).

The message was conceived so that to meet the three conditions for the audience to respond:

1. A short message which requires the receiver's rapid decision making: "There is a health risk → You can minimize it by wearing protection shoe covers → Do you accept or refuse them?" In this way, individual long term memory was not activated, being sufficient to store the information in the short term memory.

2. The receiver's answer is step-by-step conducted by gradually addressing the requirements: if initially the request is only to wear protection shoe covers, the subsequent request is to pay a certain amount of money (50 eurocents) for the pair of plastic shoe covers (as to verify the consistency principle).

3. All the required actions seem to be beneficial to the subjects (wearing protection shoe covers *apparently* minimizes the risk of contamination).

Therefore, each and every experiment (related to each group), had as main goal convincing the subjects of the protection shoe covers usefulness, and as secondary goal – the ulterior attempt to sell the protection shoes, both of the actions were undertaken by means of informing the subjects, collaborating with them in prevention, and, nevertheless, persuading them to buy, as an evidence of consistency principle manifestation.

4 Findings Analysis

In order to confirm or infirm the research hypotheses, H₁ and H₂, we compared the results obtained for each group.

The first hypothesis states that the indirect message has superior efficiency as compared to the direct message.

As it is revealed in table 1, out of the 30 subjects exposed to the direct psychological structure message 18 subjects accepted to wear the

protection shoe covers, 7 subjects even accepted to pay for them. On the other hand, out of the 30 subjects exposed to the indirect message, none of them accepted to wear the shoe covers or to pay for them. The discussion got interrupted in 29 out of 30 cases immediately after the first question: “Do you care about your health?” This is actually the buffer recommended by the specialists when the message transmitted is a negative one.

		Accepting to wear safety shoes	Accepting to pay for safety shoes
Direct message – G ₁ = 30 subjects	14 tested men	6 (= 42% of the tested men = 20% of the whole G ₁ sample)	2 (= 14% of the tested men = 6,6% of the whole G ₁ sample)
	16 tested women	12 (= 75% of the tested women = 40% out of the whole G ₁ sample)	5 (= 31,25% of the tested women = 16,6% of the whole G ₁ sample)
Indirect message – G ₂ = 30 subjects	14 tested men	0	0
	16 tested women		

Table 1: G₁ and G₂ results comparison

Therefore, **H₁**: *The message with indirect psychological structure is more effective than the message with direct psychological structure* was invalidated.

Although contradicting the theory of negative message proper formulation, some possible explanations could be claimed for this outcome. The age could recommend the direct structuring of the message - fact upheld by the findings in experiment G₁. On the other hand, when dealing with a crisis (a far more intense negative message, enhanced by a sense of danger), the direct structuring of the message seems to be more effective.

The second hypothesis states that the effectiveness of message is enhanced when supported by a psychological manipulation factor. To this end, we compare the results obtained for G₁ and G₃, as shown in table 2.

		Accepting to wear safety shoes	Accepting to pay for safety shoes
Direct message – G ₁ = 30 subjects	14 tested men	6 (= 42% of the tested men = 20% of the whole G ₁ sample)	2 (= 14% of the tested men = 6,6% of the whole G ₁ sample)
	16 tested women	12 (= 75% of the tested women = 40% out of the whole G ₁ sample)	5 (= 31,25% of the tested women = 16,6% of the whole G ₁ sample)
Direct message reinforced by a manipulation item – G ₃ = 30 subjects	7 tested men	6 (= 85,7% of the tested men = 20% of the whole G ₃ sample)	3 (= 42,85% of the tested men = 20% of the whole G ₃ sample)
	23 tested women	21 (= 91,3% of the tested women = 70% of the whole G ₃ sample)	16 (= 69,56% of the tested women = 20% of the whole G ₃ sample)

Table 2: G₁ and G₃ results comparison

When the subjects were exposed to a message containing a psychological manipulation factor the

efficiency of the message increased by over 33% in terms of the students’ accepting to wear the plastic shoe covers, and by over 46% in terms of subjects’ willingness to pay for the plastic shoe covers.

Therefore, **H₂**: *The effectiveness of the message increases when supported by a psychological manipulation item* was confirmed.

As previously mentioned, the manipulation item applied was a visual cue - the white coat. During the third experiment we noted a significant difference as compared to the other two cases. The subjects were more open and receptive to the message. From the first moments of the conversation they exhibited highly increased attention and the facial gestures indicated the subjects had a more serious attitude concerning the idea expressed in the message. Thus, the results confirm that when a message comes from a person perceived as an expert, its impact is amplified. Besides, the experiment also confirms the importance of nonverbal communication (clothing, in this case). Therefore, in order to get the audience’s attention and to determine behavioral change, the nonverbal content of the message should be aligned to its verbal content.

Besides all these, the experiment reveals an even more disturbing aspect: only one subject (from the group involved in the first experiment) out of 90 questioned the volunteers’ authority and mission. No other student asked for ID, or for a decision signed by the university management, nor did they ask for a receipt, in case of buying the plastic shoe covers.

5 Conclusion

If strictly efficiency is to be referred to for the three messages presented to the subjects (direct message, indirect message and direct message with psychological manipulation item) – the direct message proved to be more efficient than the indirect one, contrary to expectations fueled by the specialists in the field. It is clear that the young Romanian audience involved in this experiment is not so receptive to indirect messages. Consequently, for sending a negative/persuasive message we recommend using a direct structure, as the indirect message starting with a buffer has zero efficiency.

One pertinent explanation is provided by Sloman's dual-process theory of arguing. When conceiving the message on an indirect structure, the intuition (System 1) occurs, therefore the volunteers are automatically associated with salespersons, sect/cult members or charitable organizations representatives. Subsequently, the first impression proved to be impossible to change.

In case of direct structuring the message, rational reasoning (System 2) occurs, therefore students instantly found about the obligation of wearing shoe covers (that they could see and touch), and about the rational arguments sustaining this decision.

Regarding the message with a psychological manipulation item (white coats), this was the most effective. At the sight of white coats, subjects associated the volunteers with physicians, fact that activated the intuitive System 1 in a positive way. Once the audience's attention was caught, the experimenter provided rational information, thus activating the rational reasoning System 2. Therefore, verbal and nonverbal elements were coherent and aligned to the scope of the research, ending in an almost perfect message (90% efficiency).

With respect to the authority principle influence: when volunteers were associated with physicians, both the number of people who agreed to wear shoe covers and the number of people who were willing to pay for them significantly increased.

With respect to the consistency principle: its influence proved to be more obvious in the first experiment. Even if in the third group the percentage of person willing to pay for shoe covers exceeded 60% (compared to around 20% in the first group), it is difficult to distinguish between authority and consistency principles influences. However, we can conclude that the two principles enhance each other, as the number of subjects willing to pay for the shoe covers just when the two principles occurred.

Despite the outcomes of the conducted research showing an obvious propensity of the young generation towards not challenging manipulative situations, we choose to focus more on the lessons we can use in the teaching/evaluation processes. As remnants of a bygone era (the communist one) or not, the Romanian students within the experiments seems to positively react to the authority principle. In fact, irrespective of their feelings, they tend to comply with the conditions, if the transmitter of the message/requirement seems to hold a certain authoritative position. How can that be relevant for the student-professor academic relationship? Professors should encourage the freedom of opinion and decision making for their students.

Regarding the psychological structure of the message, students are more prone to react favorably if the information is straightforward, without buffers, no matter if the news is a positive or a negative one.

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