COMMUNICATION FLEXIBILITY IN ONLINE STUDENT TEAMS

David E. Hansen, Texas Southern University

The purpose of this project is to study communication quality in online and traditional student teams. This research is very important because communication quality influences trust among team members which in turn affects team effectiveness (Massey and Dawes, 2007). The conceptual framework for this work is based on speech act theory (Austin, 1962), which asserts that communication quality is related to the meaningful use of language. Speech has both predicative (PRED) meaning and illocutionary ((ILOC) meaning where predicative meaning depends on the information component of a message (truth-value) and illocutionary meaning depends on the action component (actionable usage). Quality is related to the truthfulness and actionable use of speech acts. Although this model was developed for traditional verbal communication, it applies to the situation where business or student teams make use of electronic communication methods (ECM) other than telephones. Because ECM can be employed regardless of location (world-wide), medium (spoken or written), or time (synchronous or asynchronous), we propose that ECM permits greater communication flexibility. Communication flexibility means that team members can choose from a variety of EMC methods for the best way of conveying a particular message to another team member.

There are three ways in which the use of ECM can influence communication quality and thus affect the choice of method. Due to reduction in time-place barriers, ECM-dominant (online) teams should have more communications, and quantity of communication relates to communication quality (Ou and Davidson, 2011) in that it contains implicit action-usage information. ECM-dominant teams will write things out more often due to texting, tweets, and emails, as opposed to delivering the message orally. This increases the truth-value meaning of the message because the sender will be more careful, resulting in leaner, more business-like communications (Bordia, 1997). It also increases the action-usage meaning due to the social safety of asynchronous communication. Lastly, with a choice of ECM methods and experience with team members' preferences, senders can figure out which type of method works best for individual team members and particular types of messages, increasing both types of meaning. We propose that the ECM-dominant teams (e.g., online/virtual), will have a pattern of usage involving greater variety of ECM methods, greater quantity of messages, and better understanding of communications. This should lead to more trust and should influence team effectiveness (performance, satisfaction) in a positive manner.

A pilot study demonstrated that online and traditional teams used a mix of both ECM and face-to-face communication, although online teams used mostly ECM (email/written), and traditional teams used mostly face-to-face (oral). The online teams participated more in the team's self-management (a possible sign of trust) and experienced more politeness in their communications. Online teams had higher project scores and satisfaction with the team which indicates more team effectiveness. Whether this is due to greater flexibility and its influence on communication quality and trust is unknown from these results. A second experiment is being designed to study communication quality, flexibility, and team trust in more depth.

References

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do Things with Words.* The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955. Ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà, Oxford.

Massey, G. R. and P. L. Dawes. (2007). Personal Characteristics, Trust, Conflict, and Effectiveness in Marketing/Sales Working Relationships. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41(9/10), 1117 – 1145.

Ou, C. X. J. and R. M. Davidson. (2011). Interactive or Interpretive? Instant Messaging at Work. *Decision Support Systems*, 52(1), 61-72.

Bordia, P. (1997). Face-To-Face Versus Computer Mediated Communication: A Synthesis of the Experimental Literature, *Journal of Business Communications*, 34(1), 99-120.