LIBRARY CONVERSATIONS
RECLAIMING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY FOR UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL ENCOUNTERS

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This book is intended to be used by library professionals, students, and researchers interested in interpersonal communication in all types of libraries. It is organized into two parts. The first part, Reclaiming Theory for Library Contexts, includes chapters 1 through 4, which describe and discuss a number of theoretical frameworks for understanding interpersonal communication from Aristotle through John Locke, Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson, Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues, and Erving Goffman. These frameworks enable us to reclaim principles of communication for the Library and Information Science discipline. This part takes a broad approach, discussing basic principles and illustrating these with examples from different types of library interpersonal encounters, including those with colleagues, the public, managers, and subordinates.

Building on these theoretical foundations, in part two, Applying Theory to Reference Encounters, chapters 5 through 7 extend the discussions of the initial chapters and focus in on a specific type of library communication context, the reference encounter. Chapter 6 introduces a Content/Relational Model of Success in Reference Encounters, and liberally illustrates its components with examples from librarians and library users. This model not only rests on a strong theoretical base, but also is informed by a large amount of empirical research gathered by the authors and their colleagues over several decades.

We invite the reader to join with us in an effort to understand interpersonal encounters in libraries, which is certainly an important and worthy effort. We realize that there are no absolutes in anything to do with human communication. However, we firmly believe that you will greatly benefit from reading our book with an open mind, and from applying the insights provided here to your daily communication practice.

—Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford
Reclaiming Theory for Library Contexts

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Interpersonal Communication as Practical Wisdom

Reclaiming Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* for the Professional Sphere

*We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all.*

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN (1951)

THE IMPORTANCE OF A FOCUS ON INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION FOR LIBRARIANS AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

How important is interpersonal communication in the work of librarians and other information professionals? Jaime LaRue, former director of the Douglas County Libraries in Colorado, asserted that communication is paramount for service excellence:

In the years since I got my library degree, I have seen many service transactions. The ones that were best, that left patrons with the sense that they had been well-served, were not necessarily ones in which the right answer was given, but were interactions in which staff and patron connected, occupied the same mental and emotional space. The skill that matters most in reference is communication. Some of this can be taught, eye contact, open posture, smiling, and modulation of voice. Some of it, perhaps, cannot, or not as easily: the willingness to be open to another human being, to be fully present. (LaRue 2010, 28)
Here LaRue is referring to reference service in public libraries, but what he has to say can be generalized to an array of interactions at other types of libraries. The importance of being “fully present” in face-to-face (FtF) and virtual communication in the complex, challenging, and rapidly changing work environment of twenty-first-century libraries cannot be overstated. Whether you work in an academic, public, school, or special library, or other information environment, it is no surprise to find that the major part of your day is filled with frequent FtF and virtual interactions. A quick glance at advertisements for available library positions reveals that most list “excellent oral and written communication skills” among desired qualifications. Building positive relationships with library users, as well as changing managerial models that work towards more collegial teamwork and project-management approaches, has become a strategic direction for our organizations. The ability to engage in clear, nonconfrontational, and productive communication is increasingly critical to a library’s success and to every individual’s career potential.

This trend toward more emphasis on interpersonal communication in libraries is reflected in the educational and business world, where the desire to recruit employees who are skilled and comfortable communicators is well documented (Adams 2014; Bloomberg 2015). However, it is noteworthy that most books addressing “managerial communication” typically focus on the written aspects of communication. For example, in Guffey and Loewy’s (2014) textbook on business communication, two-thirds of the chapters are devoted to written communication (e.g., memos, e-mail messages, positive letters, persuasive messages, formal and informal reports, “digital writing,” and proposal writing). The chapters addressing oral communication are limited to a few very specific communication situations, such as giving presentations, conducting interviews, and communicating with people from different cultures. Similarly, in the library literature, an outstanding handbook, Communicating Professionally, Third Edition, by Ross and Nilsen (2013), also places its major emphasis on a limited range of communication skills (oral and written, including presentation skills and training others).

This book takes as its focus the domain of interpersonal communication in the library context. The term “interpersonal communication” refers specifically to those situations in which people communicate one-on-one in the context of a conversation. Examples of conversations in professional situations include reference and other service encounters with the public; collegial interactions among staff; and managerial encounters with staff, administrators, vendors, and funders. Conversations typically take place in FtF settings, but increasingly professional conversations occur in virtual environments such as e-mail, live chat, instant messaging (IM) services, text messaging, and in social networking.
sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This book will also consider interpersonal communication in these domains.

RECLAIMING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY FOR LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

An ongoing concern for Library and Information Science (LIS) has been the need to move the field toward more theoretical richness and depth, and to explore and embrace the insights of academic disciplines beyond LIS, such as psychology, sociology, critical theory, and even philosophy (e.g., see Cibangu 2013; McKechnie and Pettigrew 2002; Radford 1993; Wiegand 1999). One objective of this book is to advance this movement with respect to theories developed in the academic realm of Communication Studies, and, in particular, their treatment of interaction in both FtF and virtual environments. Particular emphasis will be given to the relational theory of interpersonal communication articulated in the germinal theoretical work in human communication and psychology by Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, and Jackson (1967); Ruesch and Bateson (1968); and, in sociology, by Goffman (1967). The end result will be a fresh and insightful look at communication issues and problems that face librarians and other information professionals in their working lives.

One might ask why theories published in 1968 and 1967 will be relevant to a world in the second decade of the twenty-first century, which is being increasingly dominated by concerns dealing with electronically mediated communication on both the public and personal levels. In reply, we argue that it is the contemporary concern with technology, and its emphasis on the transmission of information, which must be transcended, and theories that consider communication in its human context need to be reclaimed. The fact that Gregory Bateson, Jurgen Ruesch, Paul Watzlawick, and Erving Goffman were writing in a time when the ubiquity of computers, the Internet, mobile technology, cell phones, and social media had yet to be imagined enables issues and problems in interpersonal communication to be considered more clearly.

One problem when thinking about conceptions of communication within the theory and practice of LIS is that this discourse is dominated by issues concerning the transmission and delivery of content, rather than the communication processes that make such delivery possible and successful (or unsuccessful). This book will not address the technological means of transmission, that is, how a message, a piece of information, or an answer to a reference question can physically travel from a provider to a library client, or from colleague to colleague, in the most efficient manner possible. Rather, its focus will be
on human conversations, which take place between people in each other’s physical, or sometimes virtual, presence. In these encounters, information needs or queries are expressed, discussed, negotiated, and ultimately fulfilled (or not), and relationships are established and/or developed (or not).

The germinal relational theories developed in the 1950s and 1960s address precisely and clearly the human aspects of communication: Who are the people involved? Why are they speaking to each other? What relationship do they have with each other? How does each person feel about the other, and about herself? Do these people feel comfortable in each other’s presence? Are they confident, happy, scared, intimidated, bored, or excited? What is it about the conversation that would make them feel this way? Where is the conversation taking place? Why is it taking place? What is at stake for the participants in the conversation? Who holds power in this conversation, and how does this shape the conversation? What is it about the conversation that enables the participants to interact at all, and the conversation to proceed smoothly?

These questions represent the human context of conversation in which all of our encounters with one another, whether social or professional (or a blend of both), take place.

With a few exceptions, questions such as these are either ignored or given short shrift in contemporary treatments of communication within LIS. This book aims to bring a different focus to the ways one conceptualizes the above questions, and push thought beyond the trite or expected answers, to provide a reenvisioned and deep conceptualization of in-person and virtual communication in library settings.

THE TWO FACES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Our consideration of interpersonal communication begins with the observation that conversation with others is an activity that seemingly has two distinct faces. On the one hand, interacting with others seems so easy. We talk to our friends, family members, colleagues, and even the person at the convenience store, and at no time do we feel compelled to reflect on what is happening. Talking to others is a mundane part of everyday life and, for the most part, everyone around us, even a small child, seems particularly competent to do it. Every day we find ourselves in interpersonal communication situations. We chat, consult, gossip, bicker, argue, compliment, request, and so on. Virtually, we text, e-mail, chat, and tweet fluidly throughout our day. We certainly do not feel the need to be experts in communication theory to be able to successfully engage in a conversation with another person via any mode we choose.
On the other hand, interpersonal communication can sometimes be very difficult. We find ourselves faced with situations where we are required to interact with another person, but we are not sure what to do or say, or we are sensitive to the possible reactions of the other person, or acutely aware of the consequences of the interaction. Consider the situation where a person must summon up all of his courage to ask someone he has secretly admired to go out to dinner, or a situation in which when someone is unsure what to say to a recently bereaved person, or the fateful interaction when someone asks for a partner’s hand in marriage. To apply this to the professional context in the library, consider times when a new librarian wants to speak up in a staff meeting, but is afraid that his input will be unwelcome, when a library director needs to confront an employee about chronic lateness, when we receive an upsetting e-mail or text from a colleague, when a library user insists that an overdue fine has been paid, although the computer indicates it is still outstanding, or when a university student is talking loudly on a cell phone while at the service desk. We can all certainly think of times when communication becomes stressful and risky. In situations such as these, we are often afraid we will inadvertently react the wrong way, and we would be grateful for some theory or advice to draw upon in knowing what to do and what to say.

In the professional context, we can agree that interpersonal communication situations fall along a continuum from easy (requiring little or no reflection) to difficult (requiring reflection and planning). Speaking to colleagues in the break room or sending a quick e-mail about scheduling a routine meeting would require less reflection than presenting a budget request at a board meeting, giving an annual performance review to a subordinate, or responding to a nasty phone message left by an irate library client. The question we must address is: What is it about these latter conversations that make them seem difficult and require more thought and reflection?

There are important ways in which interpersonal communication in a professional context is different from casual social conversation. For example, there are often tangible outcomes to a professional conversation. A potential promotion may be on the line, the fate of your proposal for a project or program, a large gift from a potential library donor, or a new departmental assignment. Also, the success of a particular interaction may not just reflect on you personally, but also on the group of people with whom you work, or even the organization that you represent. Explaining a poor performance evaluation to a subordinate is not only a conversation that transmits information; it may lead to that person being fired from the organization, low morale in the department, or a potentially rocky relationship with that person (and her allies) in the future.
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