

Regional

Understanding communication from Oprah to Twitter



SIUE Photo

Dr. Eric Wrobbel

There's a story about the ancient Greek statesman named Demosthenes who learned the art of public speaking by practicing with pebbles in his mouth. Learning how to effectively communicate has come a long way since 300 BC. Today, we need to know the best ways to communicate – not with pebbles in our mouths – but through a variety of technologically advanced mediums and involving various individuals, groups, contexts and audiences.

Eric “Duff” Wrobbel, an associate professor in the department of applied communication studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, explores how today's communication can be made most effective.

“My roots are in rhetoric, the study of speaking and writing,” Wrobbel explained. “But the idea of applied communication reflects how the field has expanded and specialized.” He said that there are many different branches of communication that can be studied. For example, there are areas that focus only on health communication, political communication, or organizational communication.

Applied communication also examines how to communicate with different audiences and in different contexts.

“There is a difference in talking with one person instead of two,” Wrobbel said. “The dynamics and the rules are different. When you add a third person, then the rules change again.” Who is talking also makes a difference in how one communicates and the rules for communication.

“For example, a doctor talking to a patient has different rules than two friends talking while having coffee,” he said. Context also makes a difference. For example, the context will determine the inflection one might use when talking.

“The tone and inflection a person would use

College Talk Stephen Hansen

in saying ‘How are you doing?’ is different when greeting a friend in a hospital than when seeing the same person at a restaurant,” Wrobbel explained.

Wrobbel is particularly interested in how social media impacts communication. Social media, he said, has dramatically altered all of the normal factors and rules about communication.

“Just think. There are no non-verbal cues, like a smile or some other facial expression, no change in tone or inflection and no cues like breathing or speed of talking that help the listener interpret the meaning of the communication,” Wrobbel said about social media. “Instead, the communication is compressed and without all of those visual and sound factors that help us understand what is being said to us.” This is an important reason why people use emoticons (like smiley or frowny faces) with their social media communication, he added. And an obvious danger with social media, Wrobbel explained, is that you can't edit your remarks.

“How many times have you sent an email that someone misunderstood because they couldn't tell you were being sarcastic?” Wrobbel asked. Another example might be how one communicates through Facebook. “Someone might post a comment that their dog died, and someone else responds by saying they are sad. How do you respond? Do you click on the ‘Like’ button? Social Media changes the rules of communication. It makes communication faster, but one needs to be aware of the rules.”

If rules for communication vary by audience, medium, and context, then where does Oprah Winfrey, the well-known TV talk show host, fit? And how has she been so successful in reaching a large and varied audience?

“Rhetoric is the study of public discourse,” Wrobbel explained. This branch of applied communication looks at what makes a speech great, like Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and what makes for a “great communicator,” like Ronald Reagan. For Wrobbel, people like Barbara Walters and Oprah Winfrey don't get enough credit for being good communicators.

“Oprah is famous for getting guests to cry, but Barbara Walters is exceptional in listening to people and then asking them the probing questions to reveal information that they might not otherwise,” Wrobbel said. This kind of communication skill is exceptional, he added, in that it illustrates a number of important aspects of applied communication – audience, context and verbal and non-verbal cues.

Wrobbel came to SIUE in 1993 after earning a master's degree from San Diego State and a Ph.D. from The University of Texas at Austin.

“I thought I might go into consulting,” he said, “but I fell in love with teaching.” And, he is good at it. Wrobbel has won nearly every teaching award SIUE has to offer.

“I believe in the teacher/scholar model for SIUE,” he said. “It is what makes SIUE's education special for our students. I teach what I teach because I believe it is among the most supremely practical material any student can learn. It permeates everything, and yet it is often like the water to the fish. People don't really give it any thought.”

Stephen Hansen is the Interim Dean, College of Arts & Sciences, at SIUE