

Today

Communication key to world, family relations

Many people would agree with the old adage “all human problems are communication problems.” Given recent world events, it’s hard to argue that communication between people and between nations doesn’t need improvement. And so many types of communications, argues Alicia Alexander, begins with good interpersonal skills.

A native of Blue Springs, Mo, she obtained her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Missouri State University and her doctorate in interpersonal communication from the University of Texas at Austin. Today she is an associate professor and chair in the department of speech communication at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She became interested in the area of interpersonal communication when taking a course on that subject in college.

“I felt like everything I was learning in that class was something I could use in everyday life, and something I will need to improve for the rest of my life,” she said.

She said that her field is not just about communication per se, but also about psychology. “We have moved out from just two people to looking at families and groups of people,” she said. “Originally a lot of it was based on the parent-child interaction which comes from the roots of psychology and a lot of the research came from there. But it has kind of shot off in different directions.” And communication is, of course, about much more than words.

“Much of it really is non-verbal communication,” Alexander explained. “Anywhere from 60 to 80 percent of our communication is non-verbal. That includes anything from your facial expressions, to your gestures, to your posture, to the things that you wear, to the car that you drive, the bumper sticker you put on that car, your backpack, even the type of phone you use.”

She said that you can tell when someone is not being honest because of contradictions between what is said and the person’s non-verbal expressions.

“When you say, ‘No honey, I’m not angry with you,’ but you have your arms crossed and a grumpy face, we always believe the non-verbal. Non-verbal communication is even more



Alicia Alexander

Courtesy of Skip Brooks

powerful than words,” she added.

Culture, of course, also plays a major role. “Be careful when you are interacting with people of different cultures,” she advised. “The type of gestures that you use or the symbols that we use in our culture may not be safe to use in other cultures, something that some of our presidents have experienced during their travels abroad.”

She thinks that most family problems are also rooted in communication issues. “Many families with communication problems should seek therapy, whether classes in interpersonal communication or workshops at a school or local hospital to help them improve their communication,” she said.

As an instructor, Alexander has also studied the issue of interpersonal communication in the classroom, from which she has drawn very interesting results.

“One of my recent studies that I looked at was humor in the classroom,” she said. “Kind of the hot topic right now is media use in the classroom and whether students should be allowed to text or do all these things in class. And there has been a ton of research about how faculty can create connections with their students in class and how students can create connections with their classmates as well.”

But what should be the role of the teacher in the classroom when it comes to humor? “Faculty need to limit self-deprecating humor because that ultimately hurts their credibility. And they certainly should not make fun of students because that is not cool with students at all.”

But is it always healthy to express your emotions? “That is not always a good idea,” she said. “Sometimes it could be a momentary aggravation or frustration that you’re feeling. Whether it’s your mom or your friend or whoever it is there are times when you need to bite your tongue and not express every emotion that you feel.” She believes that personality plays a major role.

“Personality is something that is either genetic or from your external environment, so it’s something that is very difficult to change,” explained Alexander. “It is very resistant to change and people would say that communi-

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

cation is more moment-by-moment. So communication is definitely more changeable. It is something that we can work with. But of course you can modify your personality as well, and I think one of the ways to modify your personality is through changing the way that you communicate.”

I asked her how the widespread use of social media has affected interpersonal communication. “I think it has changed it drastically,” she said. “I ask my students about it all the time because I am behind. I was a late adopter to Facebook. I was a late adopter to texting. Half the time I don’t know what they are talking about when they talk about some new app or their vines or whatever they are talking about.”

And, according to Alexander, social media has had an impact on the very way personal communication is carried out.

“My students did a project on this in the spring about the relationship labels you get on Facebook. Whether it’s complicated, divorced, married, single, dating, you get to put what your relationship status is. And they said Facebook is trying to keep up and keeps adding new labels because people say they don’t know which one they are, they can’t figure out what to put,” she said.

She is now looking at female faculty mothers and trying to figure out ways for them to balance work and family. “That they can make the most out of their careers and still spend as much time with their family as they can and try to maintain some sort of balance. I so desperately want to move past the challenges and find some real solutions, not just for this university, but also for universities everywhere and mothers in general.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.