

# Communicating Educational Ideas

*Research findings  
give clues to  
better staff communication.*

"WHERE do you keep your course guide?"

"In the bottom drawer of my desk—assuming that it's still there. Why? Who wants it?"

This little dialogue between two classroom teachers can be interpreted variously:

1. Some teachers are careless and unprofessional.
2. The course guide in question must be a poor one.
3. If teachers would only read the documents prepared by curriculum committees, central office personnel, and other influential persons in school systems, they wouldn't need special help in putting best practices into effect.
4. Presumably this particular course guide was not adequately explained by school administrators to their staffs.
5. Course guides, courses of study, outlines and syllabuses are worthless curriculum materials.
6. Communication of ideas is a complex interpersonal activity of much greater scope and depth than curriculum workers have

generally conceived it to be. Surely, it transcends the mere distribution and "installation" of course guides, notwithstanding their quality.

This article supports interpretation number six, in the preceding listing. It does so on the basis of curriculum workers' experience and on the basis of research data developed during the 1950's by specialists in social psychology, sociology, and human communication.

## Communication in Organizations

How may a status leader help teachers acquire, share and modify ideas which come to them from curriculum committees, research bureaus, and other idea-creating agencies? This question suggests two subsidiary questions: (a) What does research evidence say about the manner in which communication is achieved? (b) By a slight stretching of the imagination, what notions may be inferred from the research data about organizational and functional changes in schools and school systems to improve communication of ideas?

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**Ronald C. Doll is Professor of Education, New York University, New York City.**

Research studies point repeatedly to the importance of achieving genuine, effective communication on a person-to-person, neighborly basis (1). Neither the written word nor electronic devices can substitute for personal contact. Personal decision making which leads to concrete action is influenced mainly by what the members of one's intimate group are saying and doing (2). How one votes, what one buys, and the fashions one adopts are determined largely within the inner circle of one's acquaintances (3).

People communicate best with those whom they like and trust (4). They tend to meet these persons in informal situations, with ample time arranged for communication. Each person is likely to find within his own group one or more persons to whom he relates easily. As in sociometric choice, one person is often considered to be a best or favorite individual with whom to communicate (5). When a member of a group is divergent in his viewpoints, the other members spend much time (at least for a while) in attempting to communicate with him. The total effect is delay or loss in wide-spread, efficient communication.

These statements lead to the generalizations: (a) that persons who share common interests communicate readily about matters affecting their interests (7), and (b) that social cohesiveness is necessary to adequate communication. The first generalization appears sensible, even self-evident. The second implies that both emotional viscosity and geographic proximity are necessities for the interdependence that social cohesiveness can develop. As interests shift, new groupings are formed. Each newly organized group creates problems for itself, and for responsible status leaders, in achieving social cohesiveness.

Group size has an effect in determining quantity and quality of communication. Large groups, e.g., of from 25 to 50 members, tend to impede communication. Seven and 10 have sometimes been suggested as optimum numbers for group size. One investigator found that an increase from seven to 12 members impeded communication (8).

Some attention has been given to the nature of leadership that facilitates communication. Frequently, emergent leaders seem to be accepted by group members as better aids to communication than are status leaders. Having been nominated by their peers, they tend to understand and identify with goals which their peers accept (9). Sometimes they have a direct, if unofficial, line to higher authority, or they fulfill a cultural or a status need like that for a big brother or a father (10). They are usually subject to, and therefore sensitive to, the norms of their groups. They know that they have power *with* as well as *over* their groups and they are therefore able to speed decision making (11). Often they become more persuasive as they remain longer with their groups (12). Opinion leaders originate ideas, sanction them and diffuse them. Thus they encourage development of new ideas and modification of old ones, just as they help communicate ready-made ideas that emanate from outside sources (13).

Because these outside sources sometimes pose a threat, people want to know what ideas are taboo for consideration and communication. If personnel know the sanctions under which they operate, they tend to communicate concerning matters for which they have definite responsibility.

A plan or scheme for communication should be carefully considered and deter-

mined in an organization in which face-to-face communication becomes unusual or difficult. The communication scheme might include "wandering minstrels," i.e., traveling communicators who could talk with the members of each group about recent developments in other groups (14).

Communication seems to be improved by knowing where one stands with one's fellows, and also with persons farther up the hierarchical ladder (15). The desire to communicate is thus closely related to favorable morale, which is stimulated by fairness and consistency on the part of persons in authority (16).

When mass media of communication must be used, these should be truthful and accurate. They should deal with matters of concern to members of the organization. Also, their messages should be brief, direct and pointed. Several short presentations may prove more effective than a single omnibus one. Communicators should hold reasonable and modest expectations about the ability of literary or technological media to communicate with the rank and file of personnel who have had little or no part in formulating the messages these media carry. Certainly mass media function best when they carry messages that have greatest meaning for their recipients (17).

Communication among groups within organizations tends to occur by means of "natural" communication networks (18). Administrators of organizations often let these networks go unnoticed at the very times they would be benefited by knowing what influence and status, as well as informal communication arrangements, have to do with transmission of messages from group to group.

Good, open communication not only passes information: it encourages doubts, modifies attitudes and stimulates think-

ing in several ways. Without it, stereotypes develop, extreme individualism sets in, and the messages that emerge from sources of knowledge become distorted.

### Application to School Practice

The generalizations stated in the preceding paragraphs are necessarily tentative. They are based on fragmentary evidence, and they do not encompass all that is known about communication within organizations. However, despite their limitations, they suggest communication practices that are little used in American schools. The reader is invited to study the research data further and to draw additional inferences from the broader and deeper range of data which will be developed in the future.

Generalizations in the preceding paragraphs imply the following plan of organization for acquiring, sharing and modifying educational ideas:

Status leaders should provide ample time and opportunity for personnel organized in dyads, triads, and other small groupings to get together. If possible, group size should not be permitted to exceed a membership of seven. Members of the groups should like each other, and should experiment with groupings and regroupings based on sociometric choice. They should work near each other, as in team teaching situations, and should be encouraged to share their professional problems with each other. School buildings should be constructed and adapted to accommodate teams and groups of sizes appropriate to facile communication.

Within each communication group, an official communicator should be designated by his peers. He should possess some skill in communication and should

be one of the best accepted members of his group. He should receive communications from other portions of the school and school system, as well as from the outside educational world, and should assume leadership in transmitting ideas and urging examination of them. In addition, he should organize dyads of the most compatible persons for informal conversation about these ideas. When he has gathered the reactions of his group to a given set of ideas, he should transmit these reactions to a traveling communicator (a "wandering minstrel") who can inform the idea originators about the reactions. Each official communicator should hold his position as long as his group wishes him to retain it. If the official communicator is not the chairman of his group, he should assist the chairman in planning the development of new ideas and the modification of old ones, and he should then communicate the indigenous thinking of his group to other communication units in the school system. Continuous feedback of ideas and reactions to ideas is important.

All official communicators within the system should learn what matters have already been decided by higher authority, e.g., by state, county and local boards of education, and the communicators should then tell their constituents that these matters are outside their areas of decision making. They should carry news about welfare provisions which benefit the staff, and about other developments that help to build morale. Whenever possible, they should enlist the cooperation of unofficial communicators who have close friends in other communication units.

Educational ideas should be written into course guides, syllabuses and other documents, and they should be re-

ported electronically to school staffs, only *after* the ideas have been discussed, analyzed and, if possible, experimented with. Prior to this point in idea creation and communication, anything that is put into writing should be regarded as tentative. Formal written and oral statements should be brief, pointed and directly usable. They should affirm truthfully and accurately the utility of ideas which have been examined by as many staff members as possible. Persons who prepare documents should recognize that two basic kinds of messages are needed: messages to those who want to *know*, and messages to those who merely want to *know about*. These two kinds of messages might be incorporated within the same document, or they might be issued separately.

### Actions Needed

Beyond promoting the organization of a plan for improving communication, educational leaders with broad responsibilities can take several direct actions. These include:

1. *Keeping lines of communication short.* The leader of any communication unit should have easy access to the highest level of educational management.

2. *Striving to improve communication within the several small units in each individual school.* This is the level at which good communication counts most.

3. *Providing arrangements for identification and continued use of emergent leaders, including emergent communicators.* Research data seem to point to the worth of emergent leaders in facilitating communication at the grass roots.

4. *Granting personal approval to educational ideas that have been proved by test.* The educational leader should draw conclusions about the value of ideas primarily from concrete evidence of their helpfulness to the persons who use them.

5. *Furnishing personnel, materials and facilities that are required to improve communication.* Good communication, which results in much in-service growth, should not be rendered ineffective by lack of support.

Nearly everywhere one mingles with teachers and supervisors, one hears that course guides and other curriculum documents have limited effect in improving educational practice. Perhaps we need a breakthrough in organization for communication which would permit continued use of curriculum documents, but would place them in a new position in the total communication scheme.

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### Editorial

(Continued from page 75)

clude, on the one hand, the obligation of a wider background of knowledge with which to understand the new world, and, on the other hand, a consecrated devotion to our common democracy and its place in the free world.

What further meaning has the foregoing for education toward a new world? The meanings are, of course, endless—the more the question is studied and worked at, the more potentialities will be found.

In conclusion, we can say that three

factors make demands on our American education—the fact of change, our interdependence with the rest of the world, and the obligation to realize as best possible the Life-Good-to-Live. We must help our people to understand these demands and accept them as personal obligations; and we must help to have them understood as part of American democracy—what it means for us and should mean also for others in the world.

—WILLIAM HEARD KILPATRICK, *Professor Emeritus of Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York.*

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