Achieving Synchrony: The Essential Nature of Contextualizing in Family and Consumer Sciences Communications

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Professional communications permeate every aspect of work within the family and consumer sciences (FCS) discipline. Emerging communication trends are influencing a rapid adjustment in the way we deploy and receive messages while managing our daily educational and workforce processes. Drawing from recent research in business communication models, the authors have applied a FCS educational frame to aspects of synchronous and asynchronous communications. Conceptual areas of discussion include: 1) task-media fit; 2) blurring boundaries; and, 3) communicating dissent. Organizational tools to approach professional and educational communications are discussed, and a forecast regarding emerging norms and new integration of media concludes this review.

Within the vastly differing worlds of family and consumer sciences (FCS) professionals, a typical day includes innumerable communicative transactional or interactional sequences. Conference calls take place between members of a community stakeholder group with FCS educators weighing in. A college dean is asked by a department head via text message whether it is appropriate for "the LIFE group to host a TED-x within the larger spaces of MH or WH during dead week ([incoherent acronyms intended]; Kiddie, 2014)." Researchers keep a live instant messaging (IM) window open during a four-hour FCS instructor skills coding session, asking questions as they arise, or tabling various tasks until they receive the information they need in order to progress. And, FCS secondary school educators take part in: 1) classroom interactions with students by day; 2) Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) mock interview practices or cooperative team event planning sessions by night; and, 3) occasional meetings or discussions with parents during breaks or after-school appointments. Each of these contexts is managed by FCS educators at a different pace, with differing roles and many times with a wide variety of communicative media forms.

Emerging business and educational communication trends are the result of rapid language or phrase adaptations, national and international style and/or behavior integration, and multiple co-workers or teacher-student behaviors across multiple technological platforms. The humans within these phenomena are "creating, relating and adapting communication artifacts through time" (Darics, 2014). With this artifact production comes new sets of expectations and norms being reinforced across people systems in every sector, including FCS educational teaching and learning contexts.

Especially salient for the creation of these norms are three important areas of "new contextualization" taking place in our professional and educational dialogues. These areas include: a) The blurring boundaries between synchronicity and asynchronicity through technological interactions (Darics, 2014, p. 20); b) the

consideration of appropriate "task-media" fit choices (Mason & Leek, 2012); and, c) "lean medium" dissent or exchanges of disagreement (Hastings & Payne, 2013).   All three areas touch on work-related communication through technological platforms.

Blurring boundaries in asynchronous transactions.   Both text messaging and group-boundaried IM-ing are changing our interactional norms. While traditional communication provides timing as a source of context for partners (those involved in the dialogue) to interpret hidden or nonverbal information, the boundaries defined by synchronicity or asychronicity in technology are unclear.   "Chronemics" is the study of time utilization within communication, and chronemic experts assert in recent publications that "expectations or explanation for timing are influenced by positions, relationship [sic], person features, and matter urgency" (Darics, 2014).

In-person communication norms propose that delay or unavailability are factors which would terminate or postpone conversations. This is not the case with IMs or texts, but data show that partners have different interpretations for timing in these newer-platform discussions. They also suggest, however, that as people get to know each other and have longer histories of newer-platform communications, the styles of delay and asynchronous responses become part of their overall known profile of that person or group. Indeed, and perhaps unexpectedly, an educator may be just as likely to exchange an emoji-based text message with their department head as they are to review a well-crafted business-style e-mail from a seventh grader: The former being a lagging exchange wherein a stimulus and response time may happen over a period of 12 hours, with the latter happening almost simultaneously while both participants sit at their respective computers. Thus, new and more clearly drawn boundaries begin once again to take shape based upon reinforcement of styles over time.

Task-media fit choices. Alongside the discussion of informational exchange is a second topic of choosing the best-fit media for various tasks. Mason and Leek's "Task-Media Fit Model" (2012) implies that "the type of media most appropriate for a specific task will depend on factors such as the richness of information being conveyed." They suggest that when making day-to-day choices for the appropriate platform, context is key: "Consider each communication practice an artifact in relation to what has gone before, and what is intended to come in the future." In other words, you may throw your peers or students a confusing wrench in your otherwise well-operating workflow by moving to an IM-ing platform, or new web-based "live (real-time)" educational tool, when all parties were productive with e-mail, and have no need for real-time interruptions. On the other hand, if there is a need to move to a different media, sharing the history of what worked, why it needs to change, and scheduling practice sessions will help allay concerns.

When considering appropriate task-media fit, involve the individuals, the organization and/or your business or educational relationships in your decisions. Consider, too, the temporal forms of: *horizontal time*, *vertical time*, *standardized time* and *planned time*. These phrases are important to understand, so we can begin to consider our own worlds of communication. For example:

1. *Vertical timing* takes into account your own process in relation to management levels, or student levels (hierarchical differences in how people interact and respond);

2. *Horizontal timing* takes into account your own processes in relation to those within your peer or professional group, and the differences between and across your group;

3. *Standardized time* takes into account how our colleagues across the country are experiencing the regular rhythm of their work day, compared to your own two hours east or west of those with whom you are interacting; and

4. *Planned time* takes into account individual or systemic boundaries and expectations applied to how we conduct our work, and what our norms or expectations are about how people respond to our interactions.

Just as timing clarity is important in establishing asynchronous communication boundaries, the interaction of time matters in the task-fit model. Organizational communication practices create the appropriate and positive work-related atmosphere when a task fits the media platform, and all levels of those involved are able to navigate the work within their timing contexts.

  Dissent and lean media. The third leg of this communication stool being constructed is the component of "communicating dissent." Different media have varying abilities to communicate multiple interactional cues. E-mail is considered a lean medium, IMs and texts even more so. And although e-mails enable well-organized, rational and relatively emotion-free communications, misunderstandings still take place. The very nature of dissent sometimes creates an uncomfortable context, depending upon factors such as Bronfenbrenner might have imagined when constructing his Process Person Context Time (PPCT) model (White & Klein, 2008). Depending upon the organization's contextual rules and atmosphere, and the person authoring an e-mail within a specific setting, a particular dissent will be normative, perturbatory, or incite a swift and possibly intense reaction. Careful consideration of all that a particular media is missing will ensure that dissent can be tolerated when lean media is used.

  By now, you may be recalling befuddlement as you or your colleagues struggled with asynchronous communications. An example of some ill-fitting media choice for a specific student dissent toward a teacher's grade or behavior may have popped into your mind. And we would be hard-pressed to find someone who could *not* recall an e-mail evoking discomfort due to the dissent being communicated in a certain way. These particular notions are most likely, to greater or lesser degrees, part of your everyday professional lives. However, with appropriate contextualizing, these areas of daily business communication may soon become welcomed and even essential as your work develops over time.

Implications: "So What?"

  A few weeks ago, the lead author of this article received an e-mail. The message was a short missive, requesting the help of a few colleagues who were all copied to connect with a community partner who was also copied. Within the text were references to a new office of the university, acronyms familiar only to those within our university system, and abbreviated sentence structures indicative of casual and efficient dialogue familiar to those within the academy. These would not be at all familiar, however, to a person who was establishing a first business connection (Neimann-Struweg, 2013). I had

been working on this article and hit the "reply all" with much different language than I might have normally used. I first explained that the new office had not yet been announced but would be soon. I provided brief definitions to the acronyms used, and extended some language that had been abbreviated. I did this quickly, as if we were partners in traditional communication, so there wouldn't be too much time for confusion to grow on the part of the community partner. It is possible that perhaps none of those steps would have been taken had I not been considering the particular business communication issues.

And just as I used this information to contextualize for someone new to our academic system, FCS educators everywhere are onboarding a new cohort of students at the turn of every new school year. Over time, educators begin their own shorthand communication styles without awareness. Students bring new applications, phrases or even new media "languages" as they integrate all they have collected before you meet them. Taking the time to assess the new synchronous or asynchronous information you are processing will allow your classroom systems to more quickly contextualize together. Implementing appropriate task-media fit for assignments, parent check-ins, or faculty meetings will move your communication goals along more quickly. And, considering "dimensions" (horizontal, vertical, standardized or planned time) when guiding discussions, or when teaching or learning, will allow your perspective to take in a wider, and more rich, view of the dynamical FCS educational world. Given these additional frameworks and assessments of your communicative processes, it follows then that dissent – when necessary – would go more smoothly because all other contextualizing would have been considered. Educators know best just how smoothly classes can be managed when expectations are clear.

However, achieving synchrony is not limited only to a FCS educator changing the way communication and contextualization is approached in their classrooms. Teaching students synchronizing concepts for application to their own work and lives brings this discussion full circle. Examples could include:

1. Engaging students in a discussion of "task-media fit" for an assignment. Process pros and cons of options they suggest, or have them support their decisions once a choice is made.
2. Requiring a group of FCCLA officers to estimate all systems potentially involved in an upcoming event. Once they have mapped the involved systems, have them identify *horizontal, vertical, standardized* and *planned* time considerations for each. Ask how they might approach their work differently after considering the results of their exercise.
3. Assigning a "media communication personality assessment." Ask students to list one person in their home, friendship group, a teacher, and someone from a different context such as employer or church member. Ask students to assess the differences in how they interact with that person "in real life" as opposed to communicating through electronic media of any kind. Request a summary paragraph about the differences they identified to include any adjustments needed in order to synchronize their communication styles. Follow up with conversations about how *blurring boundaries* helps or hinders communication with those they described.

Communication beginning in asynchronous ways may rapidly progress once attention is focused with assignments such as those listed. Conducting overall "communication process" discussions periodically can guide further refinement for both educator and students.

A beautiful story has recently been shared across several media outlets about Neil Harbisson, a self-described "cyborg" who hears colors he is unable to see by using technology that is attached to his head (Trosper, 2015). He tells of how he first felt from the time of receiving the assistive apparatus to his present state, where the lines are blurred between the technology ending and he, as a person, beginning.

Dominick (2013) suggests that we will eventually feel like Harbisson when it comes to work-related communications and technologies and that context setting will become second nature: We won't even think about timing, and we will move into and out of the appropriately task-fitting platform as easily as if we were switching hats. And, yes, we'll even send and receive communications containing dissent with appropriate levels of emotional and logical investment. Until that time, however, understanding that our evolutionary communicative processes are rapidly reconfiguring is key for all educators. Perhaps this is especially true for FCS educators who are preparing students for the great task of life. After all, normalization is the first step toward feeling connected. And we are so incredibly connected.

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