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## **From apprehension to awareness: Toward more critical understandings of young people's communication experiences**

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In a world of aggressive consumerism and the corporatization of public life, it is perhaps not surprising that young people find themselves increasingly positioned by market forces (*cf* Fairclough, 1993; Giroux, 2003). This manifests most obviously in the large-scale changes in (Western) job markets, delaying many young people's entry into working life and extending their dependence on the parental home (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995; Mortimer & Larson, 2002). Of course, commerce knows only too well that young people—affluent or not—are nowadays also profitable customers for lifestyle advertising; as a result they are constantly branded and targeted by marketers selling everything from chewing gum to sport utility vehicles. There are, however, also more subtle ways in which young people find themselves having to respond to changing economic and other institutional circumstances. Take, for example, the following two statements made by one of the largest telecommunications companies in Europe:

Innumerable studies have shown that being able to express yourself clearly and understand with equal clarity what other people are saying to you is a fundamental enabling skill of life. A proficiency at interpersonal communication is strongly linked to educational achievement, positive social behavior, physical and mental well-being, and ultimately employability.

When people stop communicating... things go wrong. When people communicate well, good things happen. Better interpersonal communication is the key enabling skill for a better life in the 21st Century. BT is best placed as the leading communications company in the UK to help people improve their communication skills.<sup>[1]</sup>

As social theorists have noted, the commodification of so much of social life has inevitably also come to include language and communication (e.g., Fairclough, 1996; 1999; Lash & Urry, 1994). Indeed, the evaluation of, and demand for, communication as a tangible *skill* has become a key educational and workplace reality. One rarely sees a job advertisement these days which does not at some point demand ‘good communication skills.’ No doubt driven by the demands of the marketplace, educational policy-makers—at least those in the countries of North America and Western Europe—are themselves increasingly concerned with *training* (as opposed to educating) young people in the ways of ‘good’ or ‘effective’ or at least marketable communication. Elsewhere, this contemporary preoccupation with communication manifests itself in the way that communication is so commonly presented as a kind of societal, interpersonal and, in the case of psychotherapy, psychic panacea (Cameron, 2000; also Philipson *et al.*, 1999).

As in the dramatic quotations above, the boundary between communication as a supposedly key educational skill and as a major life resource is being blurred all the time—and usually with little or no empirical evidence for linking the two (the ‘innumerable studies’ referenced by BT remain conspicuously unspecified). In serving these various ends, communication is typically simplified as a quantifiable commodity, construed in terms of measurable outcomes and as a transferable ‘skill’ or technical ability. (Hence BT’s blurring of human communication and mass communications.) It is in this way too that the communication practices and abilities of young people often come to be evaluated as deficient and in need of fixing—usually in the form of skills training or therapy. Seldom are young people invited to think critically about the nature of communication, nor is there an attempt to evaluate their communication in the context of their own lives—other than in the most material (or economic) and scholastic terms. As such, their communication is disciplined in educational contexts in much the same way it is in media discourse where an adult mythology of the communication-ignorant or inept teenager is still dominant (Falchikov, 1989; *cf* also Williams & Garrett, 2002).

For scholars of communication, this itself should be a matter of some concern, because of what it says about lay (mis)understandings of human communication and meaning-making practices. For scholars of adolescence, it should also be a concern because they too have been responsible at times for misrepresenting young people and for feeding the media with many of its most troubling

ideas (Burman, 1994; Davis, 1990). Indeed, scholars ought always to reflect on their complicity in constructing the ‘myth of adolescence’ (Hockey & James, 1993) and in ways which may not be in the best interests of the very group they mean to help. On this basis, we would like to examine one case-study example of how, with the best of intentions, communication scholarship has itself problematically approached young people’s communication—which is to say, in a way which may ultimately and unwittingly devalue young people’s needs and practices as everyday communicators. Specifically, we consider the field of Communication Apprehension. To be clear, we do not mean to question the professional or personal integrity with which scholarship in this area has been developed. We recognize also that the institutional demands of classroom- or college-based praxis are not always compatible with the poetics of academic theorizing. Nonetheless, just as scholars need always to be informed by the realities of application, theoretical critique is essential for any area of scholarly activity—especially those which look to influence educational policy and practice, and thereby shape the opportunities of young people.

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### Communication apprehension: A case in point

About one of every five persons—20 percent of all college students—is communication apprehensive. (Pearson & Nelson, 1999: 24)

The term *communication apprehension* (from hereon CA) was introduced in 1970 by McCroskey, who first described it as ‘the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons’ (see McCroskey, 1970; 1984: 13). Since then, it has become a well-established topic of scholarly concern, especially in the United States. Papers on CA are published regularly in major journals such as *Communication Education*, and others are presented every year at the conventions of both the International and the National Communication Associations (ICA and NCA); in fact the NCA now has a specialized division on Communication Apprehension and Avoidance. Not surprisingly, CA is also a topic usually covered in mainstream introductory textbooks (e.g., Pearson & Nelson above; also Beebe *et al.*, 2004; Gamble & Gamble, 2001). Although not intended solely for use with young people, the notion of CA has been applied consistently to young people in educational settings, often with older, college-age teenagers (e.g., Chesebro *et al.*, 1992; McCroskey *et al.*, 1989; Proctor *et al.*, 1994; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995), but also with younger high schoolers (e.g., MacIntyre *et al.*, 2003). What we offer here is a brief overview of the basic tenets of CA as it is usually presented by scholars whose work orients directly or indirectly to the field.

McCroskey, Richmond, and their associates undertook most of the early, defining work on CA, usually conceptualizing it as a specifically cognitive trait related to communicators' feelings of nervousness, fear and worry when contemplating the act of *oral* communication in particular (McCroskey, 1982; McCroskey, 1984; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998).<sup>[2]</sup> In hypothesizing CA as cognitive, a distinction is also drawn between *shyness* or *reticence* as a behavioral manifestation (e.g., remaining quiet during a conversation), and *willingness to communicate* (WTC) as a personality-based predisposition or motivation for 'actively' communicating.<sup>[3]</sup> Although not clearly explained, a relation of causality between CA and 'ineffective' communication is implied throughout much of the academic, educational and psychological literature on the subject (see, for example, Horwitz, 2002; also McCroskey, 1984: 37). (We return to this point shortly.) Scholars have also looked to establish a connection between CA and academic success, measured in terms of attendance, student-teacher interaction, scholastic achievement and grades (e.g., Watson & Monroe, 1990).

In looking to situate CA conceptually and experientially, Richmond and McCroskey (1998: 35–37) identify eight categories of shy people, or what they call 'low verbalizers.' For example, in their first category, 'skill deficient' people are those with 'poor communication skills' who may tend to avoid communication situations as a result. The second and third categories cover socially and culturally introverted people, which takes into account how different cultures may construct communication differently; as such, measuring a person's shyness by Western standards may overlook cross-cultural differences. The fourth category of shy people described by Richmond and McCroskey comprises the 'socially alienated,' those people who do not conform to social norms, and the fifth category is made up of ethnically or culturally diverse people who, like cultural introverts, may come from a cultural tradition that does not adhere to majority norms for speaking. Finally, it is in the seventh category that Richmond and McCroskey identify those who suffer (sic) from communication apprehension as the 'fear of communicating.' CA is thus held to be both a type of shyness and one of its primary causes.

Across the CA literature there is a noticeable lack of definitional clarity between the range of disparate terms used, which leads to a fair amount of theoretical ambiguity. Terms like *shyness*, *reticence*, *audience anxiety*, and *willingness to communicate* often appear to be discussed and conceptualized differently. For example, by no means a precise term itself, there are two well-known scales to assess *shyness* (see Crozier, 2001); however, neither one appears to correlate—or to have been correlated—with CA. By the same token, while some researchers use McCroskey's delineation of CA as 'trait' and shyness as its behavioral manifestation or dimension, others use the notion of CA interchangeably with, for example, shyness (e.g., Manning & Ray, 1993) and reticence (e.g., Kelly *et al.*,

2001). It is this lack of precision which makes it especially difficult to determine what conceptual consensus exists in the field as a whole and what exactly is being examined. Indeed, Leary (1983), who himself uses McCroskey's distinction between cognitive traits (CA, 'audience anxiety') and behavior (shyness, reticence), does raise the concern that the literature runs the risk of becoming meaningless if researchers are not able to use their terms precisely. For example, the added notion of willingness to communicate is described by MacIntyre *et al.* (2003) as a personality-based orientation toward communication and the extent to which someone is predisposed to communication. Although they ally this to CA, by their own definition WTC is more a question of motivation rather than a cognitive trait. Without definitional clarity, however, it becomes extremely difficult to compare empirical studies of CA or to draw conclusions about the applied validity of the notion.

Conceptually, the link between CA and shyness is generally thought to be that of social anxiety. According to Ayers (1997), for example, CA arises from a person's conflict about being perceived negatively, combined with a self-perceived lack of competence and motivation to avoid this negative perception. Speaking about shyness, Crozier (2001) discusses this social anxiety model in depth, noting that shy individuals must likewise possess both the desire to make a certain type of impression—although not necessarily a positive one—and the inability to do so. In either case, it is anxiety about impression management that is generally presented as the (primary) cause for apprehension and/or its behavioral aspect, shyness. Although CA is also frequently linked to shy or reticent behavior, the relationship is *not* consistently presented as causal throughout the literature; for this reason it does not necessarily follow that a person with high CA will necessarily behave in a shy manner. In fact, allowing for the distinction drawn between CA as a *cognitive* capacity and shyness as behavioral, it is quite possible for people who are apprehensive about communicating still to communicate 'effectively,' just as people who do not, need not necessarily be communication apprehensive. Kuhlemeier *et al.* (2002) arguably deal with best this confusion by conceptualizing CA as a 'continuum' that can be experienced differently by the same person, depending on the situation, audience and type of communication activity. For the most part, however, the trait-state ambiguity of CA is either left unaccounted for in the literature or assumed to be a *fixed* trait (see McCroskey, 1984: 16) which predominates.

Even if one accepts the standard conceptualization of CA as a trait and not a behavior (e.g., McCroskey & Richmond, 1982), the relation between the two still remains uncertain. For example, a person may score very high on a test that measures CA, but still be an 'effective' communicator. It is also quite possible for a young person to avoid communicating for reasons other than anxiety or fear. Certainly, the lack of a causal relationship—or at least an explanation of one—between these two dimensions/elements makes it difficult to evaluate

attempts to remedy or ‘treat’ CA. Indeed, Allen and Bourhis (1996) point out that typical treatments of communication apprehension—those which focus on reducing anxiety—have not been proven to affect the development of communication skills (*cf* McCroskey, 1984: 16 & 37). What is more, if, as is sometimes the case (e.g., Kuhlemeier *et al.* 2002), CA is then reconceived as a continuum in which people experience apprehension differently depending on the situation, then assessment and intervention are even more difficult to evaluate because one’s degree of CA, and the behavior one exhibits as a result, are open to endless, state-specific variations. Finally, Crozier (2001) rightly points out that it is often other people’s *perceptions* of shyness that have the most negative effects for shy people, who are often characterized—or stereotyped—as aloof, rude or of deliberately making no effort to interact. In this case, therefore, it would be the manifest behavior of shyness, and not any putative internal trait (i.e., CA), which has the negative impact. Interventions—assessment and treatment—at the level of the individual fail to address co-constituted social judgments of shyness.

In spite of the lack of definitional clarity, and as a means of establishing its prevalence and significance as a problem worthy of study and intervention, it is frequently mentioned in the CA literature that 20 percent of the population, or one in five people, ‘suffers’ from communication apprehension (see, for example, Horwitz, 2002; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998; McCroskey, L. *et al.*, 2002). However, it is never made clear how this figure is derived.<sup>14</sup> Horwitz (2002), for example, cites two studies for the prevalence of CA; the first references an ‘Epidemiological Catchment Area survey’ of 13,000 Americans, which reported that ‘20 percent of the population reported a specific fear of embarrassment while speaking, writing, or eating in public’ (p. 11). As we have understood it from our own readings of the CA literature, ‘fear of embarrassment’ is not equivalent to CA, nor would ‘eating in public’ usually be considered a mode of communication. (Which is not to say that it might not constitute meaningful behavior.) The other study cited by Horwitz found that, of 500 participants in one US city, 21 percent ‘indicated avoidance of public activities because of embarrassment’ (*ibid.*). Whether this embarrassment was due to CA, social phobia, social anxiety or something quite different is not discussed. Ultimately, if one accepts that CA is conceptualized as a specific type of social anxiety which manifests itself in a wide range of contextually variable communication choices, it does seem difficult to imagine how one might ever validate broad claims to prevalence and therefore consequence. Through the mystification of their specific origins in public speaking, and by their reliance on the quantification of social interaction, CA’s methodological biases also generate a number of important cultural and ideological preconceptions.

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## Recontextualizing communication in adolescence

Experience shows that communication skills can be taught ... all children benefit from learning skills which will make them better friends, better employees, better life-partners and better human beings.<sup>[5]</sup>

Validity and definitional issues aside, our main concerns with CA are to be located at a more theoretical and, to some extent, political level. Specifically, we are troubled by the instrumental, goal-directed notion of communication at the heart of CA—both as a field and as a construct. As such, CA seems to remain largely unaware of its own cultural and ideological stance. Of course, these issues are by no means unique to the field of CA, which, in effect, serves only as a vehicle for expressing our wider concerns about communication in adolescence. As we have suggested from the start, and as writers like Cameron (2000) and we ourselves (see Thurlow, 2001; 2003) have argued elsewhere, the problems underlying approaches such as CA are those which also characterize the dominant paradigms of conventional ('social scientific') communication theory and application more generally. They are also indicative, or even constitutive, of common themes in popular discourse—as exemplified by the BT statements quoted above and at the start of this section.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the literature on CA is how the notion of 'communication' is itself handled. While CA is at times discussed in the context of written and sung communication, for the most part the literature clearly privileges *oral* communication—whether in the form of group discussions, informal conversations or public speeches. Having said which, in one definition, Richmond and McCroskey (1998:1), for example, do present human communication as 'the process by which a person (or persons) stimulates meaning in the mind of another person (or persons) through the use of verbal and/or nonverbal messages.' In spite of this somewhat more inclusive, multichannel conceptualization, CA is nonetheless most commonly premised on a more conventional notion of communication competence as spoken and transactional—most notably in the very particular context of speech-making and other forms of public address. The instrumentality and specificity of CA invariably relegates, if not ignores, nonverbal communicative forms (e.g., listening and silence) and everyday relational or phatic functions (*cf* Coupland, 2000; Jaworski, 1993). In this vein, the field of CA puts a great deal of emphasis on communication 'skills' and attaining 'appropriate' or 'effective' communication; these terms, however, often remain unspecified and unqualified. Certainly, they usually remain unproblematized (Fairclough, 1992).

Arising from this first concern about CA's inherent prioritization of talk is the extent to which it thereby devalues taciturnity/quietude more generally. For us, this speaks more of a cultural bias than it does of the realities of everyday communication. Although researchers in the field recognize that quality does not necessarily equal quantity—and vice versa—the underlying assumption in CA is always that loquacity is tantamount to *good* communication, which echoes widely held cultural beliefs (Cameron, 2000; Philipsen *et al.*, 1999). For the specific situational demands of public speech-making, this may make some sense; however, CA typically assumes far greater applicability. The inherent value judgment in CA is exemplified in the following extract, which on the surface seems uncontroversial, but for the fact that no attempt is made to challenge the prejudice which it highlights:

...the student who seldom interacts with peers, seldom asks questions in class, seldom goes to social functions, and rarely responds to the teacher's questions might be perceived negatively by peers as slow, unreliable, noncaring, or perhaps even as a troublemaker. (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998: 28)

In evaluating young people without question against models of communication such as the one proposed by CA, a hegemonic bias is thereby reinforced which promotes normative control rather than encourages diversity—even within any Western 'standard' (see above). As Jaworski & Sachdev (2004) have noted, this failure to challenge the institutional and societal construction of shyness as always negative—rather than a matter of personal preference or communicative choice—can have a potentially very problematic gate-keeping effect on young people's futures when teachers are encouraged to value the expressive/talkative over the reserved/quiet.

There is clearly a tendency among CA writers—as with so many communication scholars—to render communication overly problematic and individual (*cf* Coupland *et al.*, 1991), and to pathologize the nonnormative—in this case, the apprehensive or quiet. Shyness/apprehension is also typically conceived in behavioral terms as non-communication—specifically, absence of talk—which itself presupposes an 'off-on' model of communication and excludes the possibility that taciturnity (silence) can itself be communicative—and powerfully so (Jaworski, 1993).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, shyness is throughout, either implicitly or explicitly, equated with a lack of communication skill. Skillful communication is held to be verbal, oral, and active; reticence, on the other hand, is linked to a lack of success in 'social, work, and school relationships' (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998: 25). This is a way of thinking about human interaction which is premised on a largely quantified and commodified notion of communication. There is little space here for a more socially-constructed communication, by which judgments of 'good,' 'effective,' 'shy' and even 'skillful' would be understood as co-

constructed social realities rooted in institutional ideologies and relations of power.

Cameron (2000) provides a valuable critique of the ubiquity and dominance of the instrumentalist communication paradigm in educational settings—for which CA openly promotes itself. This fashion for measurable and ‘transferable’ outcomes forms part of a much broader shift in education away from the teaching of content (i.e., what you *know*) to skills training (i.e., what you can *do*), and itself has been brought upon in part by the shift to a service-oriented economy in which communication skills are increasingly valued. For Fairclough (1996), this has resulted in what he calls the ‘technologization of communication.’ As such, certain acceptable communication skills also become a form of symbolic capital (*cf* Bourdieu, 1991) by which the ability to speak (and write) in a particular way becomes more valuable than what it is you say and the reasons why you say it. This new (often hidden) agenda is, however, hierarchical, socially differentiated and informed by the interests of class and commerce. As Cameron (2000: 130) notes, education in particular plays a large role in ‘distributing the cultural and linguistic capital that communication skills represent, and it does so in ways that reflect and reproduce social differences’ or inequalities. Although we do not mean unfairly to single it out as being either all bad or especially bad, the notion of CA is one way in which certain communication choices (*speaking* actively, articulately and frequently) come to be privileged as ‘good,’ and other communication choices (listening, reticence, quietness) become uniformly ranked as ‘bad’—or at least troublesome. For us, it is certainly no coincidence that ‘at-risk’ students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds show higher levels of CA than do more privileged, ‘gifted’ students (Chesebro *et al.*, 1992; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995).

As we suggested at the beginning, a central part of popular and institutional discourses on communication these days is the belief that communication is a ‘natural’ panacea for a multiplicity of social ills. Talking, it is widely believed, will make everything all right: from family breakdown, to romantic conflict, to international disputes. This is a mythology which not only belies the realities of human communication itself, but also conceals important structural factors and inequalities. So, when CA scholars like Chesebro *et al.* (1992: 345) write that ‘effective oral communication is likely to play a critical role in reversing the outcome predicted for at-risk students,’ the structural reasons why some children are more ‘at risk’ than others is very unfortunately written out of the discussion. Nor is it acknowledged that ‘gifted’ children tend to be of a different socioeconomic class than ‘at-risk’ students—something which presumably cannot sensibly be attributed (solely, if at all) to their poor communication skills.<sup>[7]</sup> The implication that a variety of problems are caused by ‘poor’ communication—or any neatly identifiable apprehension—and thus can be solved by improving one’s communication ‘skills’ too readily assumes, then, that each speaker should

communicate in the same way. And yet ‘ways of speaking’ (indeed, the choice not to speak at all) are an important part of people’s self-presentation and identity construction. It is hard not to wonder whether training young people to communicate in a preconceived, acceptable way is not simply a means by which to discipline them into an institutional order rather than to truly empower them.

Although CA generally downplays or disregards contextual and institutional factors that may encourage some people to be apprehensive, or, alternatively, to decide strategically to refrain from communicating verbally, Crozier (2001) in fact notes that many students labeled shy or reticent do not remain so when in situations with friends and family. For example, Asendorpf and Meier (1993 in Crozier) found that there was no difference between shy and sociable children in out-of-school contexts. Thus it appears that the institutional setting of a classroom is the trigger for many ‘apprehensive’ behaviors, which could have alternate causes such as social situations, conflict with an instructor, boredom or daydreaming (Crozier, 2001). The overreliance on individual cognitive ‘structures’ of CA as a ‘cause’ of shy behavior ignores such contextual factors. Instead of thinking in terms of a person’s ‘being afraid to talk,’ and thereby laying blame with the individual, CA scholars might do better to consider how people may be made to feel intimidated, devalued or undermined by cultural norms and institutional expectations.

A disregard for contextual factors has even more practical ramifications for an approach like that of CA. Speaking of shyness, Crozier (2001), for example, points out that being tested in an institutional setting by a stranger inherently increases nervousness and anxiety. (This is in much the same way that people’s blood pressure typically rises when measured in a doctor’s surgery.) However, in using a self-report instrument (e.g., the PRCA-24—see Note 2) to assess CA, a person is required to identify and report correctly his or her cognitive state at a particular time; as such another series of assumptions are made which are not unproblematic. This type of *mentalist* approach to investigating the subtleties of human communication and other social behavior has long since been critiqued as unreliable (see, for example, Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Harré & Stearns, 1995). Report-based measures for investigating complex, situated social behavior presupposes accessible, coherent internal states (e.g., feelings, motivations, attitudes and personality traits) divorced from the institutional and interactional context in which they are first experienced and then reported. Mental constructs such as memory, belief, and apprehension are, by necessity, also discursively realized. By the same reasoning, young people’s apprehension in communication is surely situated in/by personal, interpersonal and educational social practice, and, as such, may have no ‘inner referent’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 179) to begin with. It is important at least that communication scholars especially start addressing some of these epistemological issues—and most certainly be-

fore any serious attempt is made to promote a *genetic* explanation for communication behaviors (see Beatty & McCroskey, 2001).

Of course it is not really possible to hold scholars totally responsible for the ways in which lay people or other nonexperts take up or appropriate their ideas. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, in a Foucauldian framework of power/knowledge, scholarly research both generates and legitimates ideas beyond academia (*cf* Burman, 1994; Davis, 1990). For example, Horwitz's (2002) book *Communication Apprehension: Origins and Management* is a striking example of how the instrumentalist, individualizing approach of CA has been taken up in a clinical setting and, arguably, (mis)applied more widely. Presenting itself as a guide for speech-language pathologists to the treatment of CA patients (*sic*), Horwitz's book hinges on the incorrect assumption (see Allen & Bourhis, 1996) that the treatment of CA necessarily results in behavioral change—and, by extension, major life changes. On this basis, the 'real-life' case studies that appear throughout Horwitz's book all follow much the same trajectory: a person with 'poor' communication skills suffers from a series of problems (e.g., low self-esteem, lack of success at work), is identified or self-identifies as communication apprehensive, is treated through a series of therapeutic visits, is cured, and has a better life as a result (e.g., finds a new job, takes an exciting trip, becomes successful). As such, this book exemplifies the sway of popular misconceptions about communication, as well as highlights the need for scholars to examine their own complicity in promoting these misconceptions, however inadvertently.

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## Reconceiving young people's communication

What we would like to do in the last part of this chapter is to point very briefly to an alternative way of approaching communication in adolescence—both theoretically and in practice. For the most part, these ideas are based on the framework of *communication awareness* which, in responding to some of the issues outlined at the start of our chapter, proposes the value of approaching communication from the perspective of young people themselves (see Thurlow, 2001). Importantly, this framework is rooted in key epistemological precedents established by earlier research in the areas of communication ethnography (e.g., Katriel & Philipsen, 1981), language awareness (e.g., Hawkins, 1984) and folk linguistics (e.g., Preston, 1993).<sup>[8]</sup>

One major rationale for researching communication in adolescence these days is to find more suitable and sensitive ways of 'empowering' young people with the kind of 'communication capital' (Thurlow, 2003 after Bourdieu, 1991) they need in order to face increasingly complex social and economic challenges

and to respond more successfully to the heightened semioticization of contemporary life (see also Lash & Urry, 1994). This should, however, only ever be done by means of what Fairclough (1992: 16) calls a critical needs-based approach, which he explains thus:

Links should constantly be made between work on the development of [communication] awareness and the [communication] practices of the learner. This practice must be 'purposeful'. That is, it must be tied to the learner's *real wishes and needs* to communicate with specific people. (emphasis ours)

In this sense, approaches to assessing and developing young people's communication should be first and foremost rooted in their existing capabilities and understandings, such that they are also encouraged to think of their own (and others') communication practices with reference to everyday, firsthand experiences, as well as to relational and institutional contexts of power and inequality. In the tradition of communication ethnographers, the best place to start therefore is by asking young people what they already know about communication (*cf* Katriel & Philipsen, 1981).

Adults are always problematizing young people's communication (see, for example, Drury & Dennison, 1999; Williams & Garrett, 2002) and yet few studies explicitly examine communication from the perspective of young people themselves. This is all the more surprising given how much is also written about the state of young people's communication in the media. Within the field of language and communication research, Baxter and Goldsmith (1990: 383) have attested to 'the rich communicative resources with which [teenagers] frame their everyday accounts to others of their own and others' communicative practices.' Other isolated examples of research in which young people have been asked to reflect directly on communication include de Klerk's (1997; see also chapter 7, this volume) work on young people's use of expletives and Garrett and his colleagues' study of young people's language attitudes (e.g., Garrett *et al.*, 2004; see also chapter 3, this volume). In addition, there are also examples from other fields, such as psychology, in which researchers have examined communication in a way which prioritizes young people's firsthand accounts (e.g., Hortaçsu, 1989; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Rosenthal & Peart, 1996).

In addition to this handful of studies, some of the only other research we know of which focuses explicitly on young people's existing understandings of communication is that done by researchers working for the Trust for the Study of Adolescence in England (e.g., Drury *et al.*, 1998, 1999; see also chapter 13 here). What this work has in common with the more recent findings of our own (e.g., Thurlow, 2001; in prep), is that it shows how, contrary to adult stereotypes, young people often understand communication in complex ways and cer-

tainly in ways which are more contextually sensitive than mainstream communication scholarship sometimes presents it.

Young people may not be in communication with adults or in ways which adults would like them to be, but this does not mean that they have no sense of communication or that they necessarily have an awareness different from adults. (Thurlow, 2001: 220)

Establishing what young people already know about, and understand by, communication addresses an otherwise noticeable hiatus in the academic literature which writers have for some time suggested was worth addressing (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). This research also complements existing social and life-span research in other fields. Patterns of interaction and so-called youth culture are changing all the time, so research which reports afresh on any aspect of the lives of young people helps to sustain the validity and currency of both academic and applied understanding. Young people's own ideas also offer a potential starting point not only for further research, theorization and intervention, but also for classroom discussion and intervention. In these terms, and in an attempt to move away from unduly pathologizing competence-based models of communication, it is also important that young people not be evaluated willy-nilly against preconceived standards of what is (is not) 'appropriate' or acceptable in only certain very specific settings (Fairclough, 1992). In other words, they should not simply be taught *how* to communicate (properly), but also be taught *about* communication, and about how some forms of communication come to be valued and codified as correct (or proper) and others do not. Otherwise, argues Cameron (2000: 132), we run the risk of merely *styling* young people rather than skilling or empowering them.

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## Notes

1. The first of these two statements comes from a BT 'social investment and corporate responsibility' program titled *Communication Skills for Life*—see

<[www.bteducation.bt.com/education/for\\_you/making\\_the\\_case.cfm](http://www.bteducation.bt.com/education/for_you/making_the_case.cfm)> (accessed 10 January 2005). Based on an earlier BT program, the second statement was made as part of a 1998 consultation with the UK government's Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport—see <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmcmums/818/8070919.htm>> (accessed 10 Jan 2005). See also Note 5 below.

2. McCroskey and his colleagues have developed a series of self-report questionnaires for assessing CA and related aspects; the PRCA-24 scale is the standard measure for CA itself. Items on this scale include the following (out of a possible 24):

- *Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense & nervous.*
- *I am afraid to express myself at meetings.*
- *Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.*
- *Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am giving a speech.*

Other scales developed by McCroskey and his colleagues include WAT (writing apprehension), TOSA (speaking apprehension) and PRICA (intercultural apprehension). A situational measure of CA is the SCAM scale. (More information is available at <[www.jamescmccroskey.com](http://www.jamescmccroskey.com)>.) A short example of the type of scales used is FOP (fear of physician—see Richmond *et al.*, 1998):

*Please indicate how well each statement describes how you feel when communicating with your physician employing the following scale:*

*1 = not at all; 2 = somewhat; 3 = moderately so; 4 = very much so*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. *When communicating with my physician, I feel tense.*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. *When communicating with my physician, I feel calm.*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. *When communicating with my physician, I feel jittery.*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. *When communicating with my physician, I feel nervous.*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. *When communicating with my physician, I feel relaxed.*

3. Willingness to communicate (WTC) is defined as 'a person's general attitude towards talking with others' (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998:38).
4. From our own investigations, it seems that the widely cited figure in the CA literature is extrapolated from a variety of surveys that span more than 30 years and include some 60,000 participants. Although this is an impressive research population, the individual studies differ both in methodology and in what was measured; although some look at CA, and some at social anxiety, others consider the effectiveness of systematic desensitization as the usual 'treatment' for CA.
5. This comment by Phillips (1998—quoted by Cameron, 2000: 125) is from a research project funded by another of BT's program (see Note 1 above) *FutureTalk: A Life Support System for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

6. Studies looking to link CA and scholastic achievement have had mixed success (see, for example, Ericson & Gardener, 1992; Dobos, 1996). Along similar lines, Jaworski and Sachdev (2004) note that there is no research evidence for a correlation between amount of speaking in class and academic achievement.
7. In a cursory review of a major English-language dictionary and thesaurus, we noticed how the semantic field indexed by 'shyness' does reveal a certain cultural ambivalence similar to other communicative behaviors such as small talk (see Coupland, 2000) and silence (see Jaworski, 1993). In addition to an apparent vagueness between the *incommunicative* (i.e., not able) and *uncommunicative* (i.e., not willing or inclined), and an ambiguity between *taciturnity* and *reticence*, we identified a contradictory valence running across the range of synonyms for 'shy' with more negatively connoted terms (e.g., curt, sullen, monosyllabic, evasive, antisocial, inarticulate), more 'neutral' terms (e.g., secretive, cautious, guarded, reserved, laconic, unsociable) and more positively connoted terms (e.g., concise, succinct, self-contained, mum). It is unclear why CA writing eschews these common terms or avoids theorizing their semantic-lexical boundaries in relation to CA.
8. As part of more recent research, Thurlow is also looking to extend his interest in awareness to include young people's sense of themselves as communicators (e.g., Thurlow, in prep).
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