

DEVELOPING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS THROUGH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Developing the Interpersonal Communication (IPC) skills of the students has become one of the main goals of engineering education especially in a developing country like India. To enhance and enrich the employability of the millions of students entering the global job market at the end of every academic year, the need and importance of developing the interpersonal communication skills of the students at under graduate level and the viable ways to integrate interpersonal communication skills in the English language curriculum are widely recognized and accepted by all academicians. This paper proposes a novel and dynamic approach to develop the interpersonal communication skills of the students using 'poetry' as a potential tool. It explores the field of communication studies, highlights the 'interpersonal relationship' in the process of all contexts of communication and emphasizes the role and significance of interpersonal communication skills. It shows poetry as a prospective genre to be used in the interpersonal communication skills development classes as a teaching material and guides in identifying the methods to adopt a poem to achieve the objectives of teaching and learning process. It provides a sample followed by analysis that proves the proposition. It also enlists an array of poems that can be used to develop interpersonal communication skills of the student fraternity.

KEYWORDS: Human Communication and Relationship, Interpersonal Communication Skills, Mending Wall, Poetry

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an everyday social activity that is an essential and inherent component of every human being. It is a key to human development because the quality of our existence is linked directly to the quality of our communication. The term 'communication' is one of the most over analyzed terms in the academic arena and it has been studied systematically since ancient times. It is a multidimensional field of study and it cannot be confined within a single paradigm in narrow limits.

The theories of communication provide a set of useful tools for viewing the everyday processes and experiences of communication through the new lenses. A multiplicity of interdisciplinary theories and approaches is available in the fields of communication studies, cultural studies, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, clinical therapy, discourse analysis, semantics, rhetoric, hermeneutics and others. Communication is an interdisciplinary component of all the above fields of study. According to Robert T. Craig (2008)

"Communication ... is not a secondary phenomenon that can be explained by antecedent psychological, sociological, cultural, or economic factors; rather, communication itself is the primary, constitutive social process that explains all these other factors". (p.2)

The kaleidoscopic nature of communication fascinates the researchers in the field of communication and motivates them to delve into it deeply.

COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Since 1960s 'relationships' have been an important subject related to communication. Carl Rogers and Martin Buber who belong to the 'phenomenological tradition' focused on the relationship aspect of communication. The works of Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor spurred the field of communication studies and their 'social-penetration theory' paved the way for a long tradition of investigation into relational development of language and communication. Stefan Prutianu (2000) emphasizes the importance of 'relationship' in the process of communication in the following statement:

“...the relationship generated by communication becomes more important than the informational content which is being transmitted.”

The study of relationships fascinate every individual because they are unique, dynamic, ever changing based on the sociological, cultural, religious, linguistic, economic, educational, and political relationships that every human being maintains with other individuals. Carl Rogers, a legend in the 20th century approaches to human relationships, propounded theories on communication and provided guidelines to communicate more effectively within relationships. According to Rogers, 'self' is inseparable from relationships and communication evolves in relationship. The world is formed through relationship and the ideas about what is important in every human being's life has been formed through interpersonal communication skills (IPC). John Stewart says that “...there is a basic movement in the human world, and it is toward relation not division.” (2009, p.7). All these inferences lead to accept that developing and maintaining relationships have become central to the process of communication in the present scenario.

ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Interpersonal communication skills are a key to a well-developed civil society and, which can best be achieved through education. A cursory look through the classified section of any newspaper, magazine, and article indicates that excellent 'communication skills' and 'interpersonal skills' are a prerequisite for getting a job regardless of the field of work and designation. NASSCOM-McKinsey Report-2005 observed the lack of employability skills among the students aspiring for jobs and indicated that

“... only about 25% of technical graduates and 10-15% of general college graduates are suitable for employment in the offshore IT and BPO industries respectively” (NASSCOM, 2005, p.16).

It also highlighted that most of the students are good at 'core competencies' but they lack 'communicative competence'. Communication discipline should be viewed as central to the goals of the educational system, especially in the domains of engineering and technology since the employees need to communicate with administrators, managers, technicians, vendors, suppliers, customers and co-workers for sustainable development. In the development of self-confidence and human relation skills, the development of interpersonal communication skills has become the main objective (Shannon, 2004). Levine's (2005) article, *College graduates aren't ready for the real world*, published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* supports this:

Many young adults are growing up in a non-verbal culture that makes few, if any demands on language skills. This has been considered as one of the reasons why more college students today have development problems such as difficulties in processing language or communicating verbally (both speaking and writing), an inability to focus attention or reason quantitatively, and a serious lack of problem solving skills. (B11-B12)

The exigency related to the development of interpersonal communication skills should be viewed and addressed by the experts in the academia with great concern and teachers of communication must find viable and effective ways to develop the interpersonal communication skills of the engineering students to cope with, and communicate effectively in the increasingly complex, diverse global and multi disciplinary environments.

THE ROLE OF POETRY IN DEVELOPING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In this globally connected and technologically enhanced world, the contemporary society is getting diverse and the process of communication is getting more complex. The researchers in the field of communication studies have been in search of feasible and valuable approaches, methodologies, strategies, and principles to reach the objectives of communication. The role of literature in the teaching, learning, training and development of language and communication skills has been recognized, realized and acknowledged by the researchers. The roles and applications of literature in language education have been extensively described and debated but not have been sufficiently researched (Kramsch, 1993). Widdowson (1981) highlights the multiple values of literature in teaching and learning a language in the following lines:

We read on, caught up in the discourse, involved in creating a world with language, and learning a language at the same time as we use it in the realization of another reality. Far from being diminished, human experience is extended. (p.213).

In this era of ‘communication revolution’ where human beings are dominated by virtual images and electronic communication tools, using literature alongside other texts, audiovisual and oral materials, will definitely enhance and enrich interpersonal and cross-cultural understanding of the process of communication.

Using poetry as a potential tool to develop interpersonal communication skills is an attempt to overcome the difficulties in communication and relationship development. Michael Halliday, cited in Steven Croft and Robert Myer (2008), has famously outlined the possible range of texts as

...being prose or verse, dialogue or monologue, it may be anything from a single proverb to a whole play, from a momentary cry for help to an all-day discussion on a committee. (p.1)

Among all genres of literature, poetry shows a wide variety of interpersonal contexts. Poetry encompasses the whole range of human experience and the features that it possesses are dynamic, diversified and unique. Poets have a whole range of different forms, structures, techniques and styles to express their emotions, feelings, opinions, perceptions, perspectives, ideas, concepts, experiences etc. The emotional dimension of language can be identified and used in developing interpersonal relationship and communication skills. The possibilities of individual expressions in the form of poetry are infinite and the language used by poets in communicating with others will always be unique. Every poem has its distinctive peculiarities, the innate formal limitations and possibilities. It may never quite be the same as of another in terms of expression, tone, mood, atmosphere, diction, etc. The distinctive features of poetry in comparison with other forms of literature will definitely persuade every teacher of language and communication to use poetry in their classrooms. Since

poetry ‘helps’, ‘encourages’, ‘broadens’, ‘expands’ or ‘improves’ awareness and analysis of how written, spoken and visual language works, how words are chosen, the sounds they make and how forms are structured. Consequently, poetry is a ‘key’ which opens the gates to language, enabling learners to pass through and continue more readily on their largely prosaic journey. (Dymoke, 2009. p.79)

It is an enriching interpersonal communication tool, which shows new ways to communicate effectively and in turn relate with others interpersonally. It is the task of the communication teachers to identify, select and use prominent and authentic poems to develop the interpersonal communication skills of the students to cater to their needs and expectations.

ROBERT FROST'S 'MENDING WALL' AS AN EXAMPLE

Mending Wall is the opening poem of Frost's second volume, *North of Boston*. It is an often anthologized and analyzed poem. Its central theme is interpersonal relationship as it deals with the relationship between two neighbors in an orchard. The intricacies in maintaining healthy relationship with a fellow human being is appealingly portrayed in this poem using two characters – the narrator and his neighbor. On the surface level, it portrays a scene in which the narrator and his neighbor cooperate with one another to mend a cracked wall and then begin a reasoning dispute over the significance or insignificance of having a wall between them. One argues that 'good fences make good neighbors' but the other insists that 'something there is that doesn't love a wall'. Their argument is endless but the poet stresses that borders are unnecessary among human beings. Being open to the views of others is important for maintaining relationship with others.

However, a deeper analysis of the poem unfolds more underlying conflicts which transmit a different light on the scene. This poem begins with a puzzling statement that 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall,' and presents the views of the perplexed narrator who doesn't know anything about the unknown force that 'sends the frozen-ground-swell under it/And spills the upper boulders in the sun', creating measurable gaps in the wall. The opening lines of the poem unfurl the enigma in human relationship. The description of gaps caused by hunters disrupts the scene and brings in a preliminary conflict within the narrator's mind. He opines that man-made gaps are forceful, destructive and merely for a personal purpose:

To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there,.

The narrator expresses his wonder and admiration to a naturally-cracked wall. But it should be noted that this preference foreshadows the narrator's calm but cold reaction on mending a wall at the end of the poem. The central conflict of modern human relationship is presented here. Through the narrator, the poet emphasizes the fact that the walls are built between one another to hide feelings, thoughts, and the reminiscences of the past or the future. It is found in the following lines:

And set the wall between us once again. / We keep the wall between us as we go.

In this poem both characters respect each others' boundaries and they meet regularly to make repairs on their relationship. Both of them take the responsibility for their part of the disrepair of the wall. The accountability to be taken by the individuals living in relationships and the efforts to be taken to sustain in relationship are highlighted in this context. In the next four lines the poet talks about the compromise and effort it takes to repair the wall:

And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.

To maintain healthy relationships we need a lot of balancing activity like jugglers. But when our backs are turned from each other we often let the 'balls' drop. Here the importance of face-to-face communication is highlighted. Relationships are of course the harvest of hard work. It is at this point that the poet playfully questions his neighbor on the need for walls. The poet values and respects the boundaries in their relationship, yet he desires more access to his neighbor, as he says:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offense.

These lines reflect the curiosity lies in every individual who repeatedly tries to achieve the goals of interpersonal communication and relationship building.

The object 'wall' is used as a symbol and it helps the narrator as well as the readers to realize that the wall separates him (them) from his (their) neighbor(s), at the same time unites them at mending time. Here in this poem the narrator is the one who contacts his neighbor so they can make the repairs 'And set the wall between us once again.' This idea can be used as guidance for repairing the problems in our relationships through negotiation.

The poet presents a vivid description of the neighbor (lines 38-40) who is grasping a rock to repair the wall; "I see him there...like an old stone savage armed." He guides us to appreciate the opponent's efforts to repair the wall (mending the relationship). But the next two lines (41 & 42) bring in ambiguity in understanding the attitudes of other individuals:

He moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

The 'darkness' mentioned here is the ignorance of individuals involved in relationship and the he stresses the need to identify who the other individual really is instead being ignorant about others. An intriguing area in the domain of interpersonal communication studies is the study of space i.e. 'proxemics'. Human beings are highly territorial and they create an imaginary bubble around them to provide a sense of personal security and comfort. This poem treats this concept excellently. Behind the literal representation of building walls, there is a deeper metaphorical meaning, which reflects people's attitudes towards others. It reflects the 'personal space' created and maintained by people, in the belief that 'wall' is a source of protection. This is shown through the repeated utterance of the neighbor, 'good fences make good neighbors' (line 27 & 45). The wall is symbolic to the diversity in the perception of relationship; one person prefers to be left alone, while the other is curious and enjoys company of others. Maintaining control over such space is a key factor in the process of communication and maintenance of relationship. So, this poem can be used to explain the use of space by human beings in the process of communication and relationship building.

The emotional barriers hinder the process of interpersonal communication. Suspicion, mistrust and fear characterize these barriers. A little amount of fear and lack of trust are acceptable in the way of communication but excess of these things is not good. The central object of this poem, the wall, becomes the symbol of emotional barrier between the two individuals. The two kinds of barriers-physical and emotional are presented in this poem. The poem proposes that people create emotional barriers and find difficulties in the maintenance of healthy relationship. The barriers may be race, caste, religion, color, economy, educational qualification, profession, etc. This poem justifies that even nature does not approve the artificial separation; this is shown through the wall getting damaged during the winter months. It echoes the belief that nature always wants human beings to be united and not to be separated.

This poem starts with the dictum "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," and ends with the principle "Good fences make good neighbors". These are the only two lines which are repeated in the poem. It begins with a note of

conflict and ends with a note of suggestion. The conflict arises between these two lines encircles the poem. This poem is an excellent example to be used in an engineering class at under graduate level to develop the interpersonal communication skills of every individual to understand the various components of interpersonal communication skills.

CONCLUSIONS – A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

This paper emphasizes the need for developing interpersonal communication skills and stresses the paramount importance to be given by all teachers of language and communication considering the need of the hour. The brief survey of ‘communication’ and ‘interpersonal communication’ as major fields of study shows that the study of interpersonal communication is still developing and there is much more space to be explored. This paper suggests the use of ‘poetry’ as a pertinent choice among all other genres of literature and relieves the teachers involved in the process of interpersonal communication skills development from the hunt for suitable materials to be used in the classes. It will also motivate the teachers to find a poem like *Mending Wall* among the poems available in abundance. D.H. Lawrence’s *Snake*, T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock*, W.H. Auden’s *The Unknown Citizen*, Tony Harrison’s *Long Distance – II*, William Blake’s *A Poison Tree* are some of the poems that deal with human relationship and communication and they shall be used in the classes to impart the principles and strategies related to interpersonal communication and relationship. This paper opens up the infinite possibilities to approach a poem in the line of interpersonal communication and guides the teachers to understand to what extent it can be used as a teaching tool. It will definitely motivate every teacher of communication to unravel the myriad of meanings and themes concealed in a piece of literature to be adopted as a teaching material. As a result, it will enhance the student fraternity to relate with others with their ability to communicate interpersonally in personal and professional contexts in achieving the fullest human potential.

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