

EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERM COMMUNICATION BY FUTURE PROFESSIONALS

Emilie Franková

Abstract: *The paper presents partial results of extensive qualitative research performed at the Faculty of Business and Management of Brno University of Technology. Within the research, the meanings of key management and economic terms in the minds of future professionals were explored by means of mind mapping. The paper deals with one of the examined terms – communication – and the possible connections between an effective interpersonal communication and the meaning and understanding of the term communication in the minds of respondents – students of the field of Managerial Informatics. The obtained results are commented upon and discussed. The conclusion summarizes the recommendations for the teaching of effective interpersonal communication both at schools and within further training of managers, entrepreneurs and employees.*

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Keywords: communication, meaning associated with the term communication, mind mapping

1. Introduction

“We cannot avoid communicating.” This statement [1] can be considered the basic rule of social or interpersonal communication. We are often reminded that a human being is a social being and that we become people thanks to growing up among others – and communication with them interweaves with our entire lives [2]. However, if that is so why do people so often not understand each other? May that be because the term communication, so frequently used nowadays, is used and understood in different meanings, which can easily cause problems not only in our personal but also study and work environments?

The term communication comes from Latin *communicare*, which means to share, divide with, join with; the base of the word is *communis* which means common [3]. The quoted Czech entry in the encyclopaedia confirms our everyday experience that the word can be used in many different meanings, e.g. for conveying information, electronic communication, verbal communication, nonverbal communication, interpersonal communication, mass communication, group communication and others; moreover, in Czech it is used for roads, in English it is used for messages or documents and in plural for routes and transportation for moving troops [4].

It follows that the term usage is complicated by the many different meanings. However, if we seek our interpersonal communication to be effective and we wish to achieve mutual understanding, then it is vital that the communicators use terms in the same or at least similar ways.

Within an extensive qualitative research implemented at the Faculty of Business and Management, Brno University of Technology, we explored what meanings the term communication is associated with in the minds of respondents and how these meanings can affect the mutual understanding.

2. Research Aim and Methods

2.1. Mental Mapping of the Term *Communication*

The above mentioned qualitative research focuses on mental mapping of meanings of key economic and management terms in the minds of future professionals in these fields. The respondents of the first stage of the research implemented in school year 2009/2010 were the students of first years of various study fields in the daily program, and the collection of data (i.e. the creation of mental maps) was carried out at the beginning of the first year, i.e. at the beginning of their studies. The research project assumes that future professionals will expand and deepen their knowledge of key terms from the fields of economics and management during their university studies and that this shift will be possible to record at a higher level of their studies. It means the research is designed as longitudinal.

2.2. Research Aims

The aims of the part of qualitative research presented here were:

- to elicit respondents' mind processes related to the relevant term;
- to capture the content and the structure of these mind processes by the method of mind mapping;
- to use results of the obtained mind maps analysis for a demonstration of the possible ways of using this method for the mapping of the meaning (understanding) of terms;
- to point out the possible use of this method for both teaching and managerial and entrepreneurial activities.

2.3. Methodology and Research Sample

The method used in the presented research for the examination of the term *communication* in the respondents' minds was mind mapping, i.e. an intentional evocation of theme-oriented mind processes and the capturing of their content and structure in mind maps ([5]; [6]; [7]; [8]; [9]; [10]; [11]; [12]).

The creativity expert Tony Buzan is considered to be the author of the concept of mind maps [13]. However, the use of spatial structures, models and images for the formation and expression of thinking and mind processes and systems has been known for many years (e.g. [14]; [15]; [16]; [17]; [18]; [11]; [12]; [19]; [7]). Nowadays, various methods for mapping and their different aims and results of their use both for individuals and for teams and organizations are being published and widely discussed ([5]; [6]; [20]; [21]; [22]; [23]; [24]; [25]; [26]; [27]; [28], etc.). The publications of these and other researchers prove that an appropriate mapping method used in correspondence with the demanded aim brings valuable information for the development of an individual, a team or an organization ([10]).

Within the presented research individual mind maps were created. The respondents, i.e. the students of the first year of study fields in a daily program at the Faculty of Business and Management of Brno University of Technology, were among others presented with one of the key management terms, i.e. the term *communication* – and their task was to capture their mind processes based on this central point and the resulting structure by means of an individually created mind map.

The obtained maps were analysed both as regards their form and content. The paper concentrates on the results of the content analysis of first level associations for a group of students (men) of Managerial Informatics. Among all respondents there were 102 of them, or rather 95 as this number of students submitted complete data and the remaining 7 students handed in incomplete data; therefore, they were excluded from further processing.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results of the Term *Communication* Meaning Examination

The results of the mind map analyses showed that each respondent created an original mind map capturing the content and structure of their mind processes initiated by the provided instruction and the central point, i.e. the term *communication*.

In the analysis, we assume that the meaning of a provided (central) term, i.e. the meaning the respondents associate with the term, and also their knowledge related to the term, are reflected in different meaning levels visualized in each of the analysed mind maps. This paper will only present the first levels of meanings (associations) as we consider these to be the meanings which are most closely connected with a term [8]. In the qualitative methodology, each response, even a unique one, is significant. The mind maps obtained from 95 respondents concerning the term *communication* contained 581 first level associations in total. The following tables present the associations according sorted into the identified meaning categories; we are aware that the classification of associations is not always clear; further, that other ways of classification are also possible and some associations could be classified to different categories from those we have chosen.

Table 1 presents the understanding of the term *communication* in the sense of *interpersonal communication*; Table 2 presents the understanding of the term *communication* in the sense of *technical support for interpersonal communication*, and Table 3 shows the associations expressing the evaluation of communication. We did not include associations of *communication* connected with *transport* (in total 18 first level associations) and those connected with the communication among animals (in total 2 first level associations). Moreover, further 14 first level associations were excluded from the tables for their variety and specific nature or unclarity of meaning.

Table 1 Communication in the sense of interpersonal communication. Source: the author.

Number of first level associations	Content of identified categories
88	verbal communication, speech, language, letters, etc.
30	purpose of communication (relationship, relationships, greeting, fun, message conveying, education, lobbying, etc.)
28	people, a person
21	nonverbal communication, body language, gestures, etc.
18	place of communication (school, army, sport, disco, pub, shop, work communication, in private, space, etc.)
14	talk, chat, dialogue, conversation
12	clichés, swearing, lies, bullshit, etc.
12	friends, friendship, partnership

10	with parents, with a partner, with a professor, between a married couple, etc.
10	the essence of communication (basic feature, exchange of information, current, need, message, base of interpersonal relationships, necessity, etc.)
7	meeting, negotiations, discussion, team communication
5	social, society, contact
5	eloquence, expressing, impression, art
4	becoming closer, making ourselves understood, cooperation
2	names, titles
2	monologue
2	family
15	unclassified associations
285	sum of first level associations in the sense of interpersonal communication

The overview of first level associations and their classification in Tables 1 and 2 show that the term communication is predominantly associated with interpersonal communication in the respondents' minds (285 first level associations), and further with the technical support for interpersonal communication (235 first level associations). We can state that the meaning of the term *communication* reflects the necessity and the importance of interpersonal communication in the lives of individuals and the society and that in this group of respondents, Managerial Informatics students (men), the meaning of the term *communication* is probably linked not only to their common user experience with working on PC but also to the content of their study field.

Table 2 Communication in the sense of technical support for interpersonal communication.
Source: the author.

Number of first level associations	Content of identified categories
76	information media (internet, TV, radio, media)
55	telephone devices, incl. mobiles, faxes, PDA and HTC
25	communication applications for communicating via internet (e-mail etc.)
25	computer communications (PC with components, data, informatics)
24	communication devices in their temporal development (from pigeon post to modern technologies)
10	wireless communication infrastructure (e.g. wifi, satellites, etc.)
7	voice communication via telephone devices
6	social networks for communication on the internet (mainly facebook)
5	wire communication infrastructure
2	other communication using telephone devices (SMS, videochat)
235	sum of first level associations in the sense of technical support

We also separated and classified first level associations with an obvious evaluating aspect (see Table 3). They form a small fraction of the total number of first level associations (4.6 %); however, it is notable that most of the evaluating associations are negatively biased – 19 out of 27 evaluating associations. On the other hand, we are aware (as has been mentioned) that the classification of associations is sometimes ambiguous and other ways of classification can be used, which could show a different ratio between the negatively and positively biased meanings of the term.

Table 3 Associations with evaluating aspects. Source: the author.

Number of first level associations	Content of identified categories
12	problem, problems, lack, not good at, unskilled, sometimes zero, hard to start, stagnates, tiredness, complicated, a lot of effort
6	joy, respect, sharing, tolerance, ethics, responsibility
3	aversion, fight, bullying
2	important, importance
2	stupid topic, silly
2	defects, noise
27	sum of evaluating first level associations

3.2. Fictitious mental map capturing the obtained results

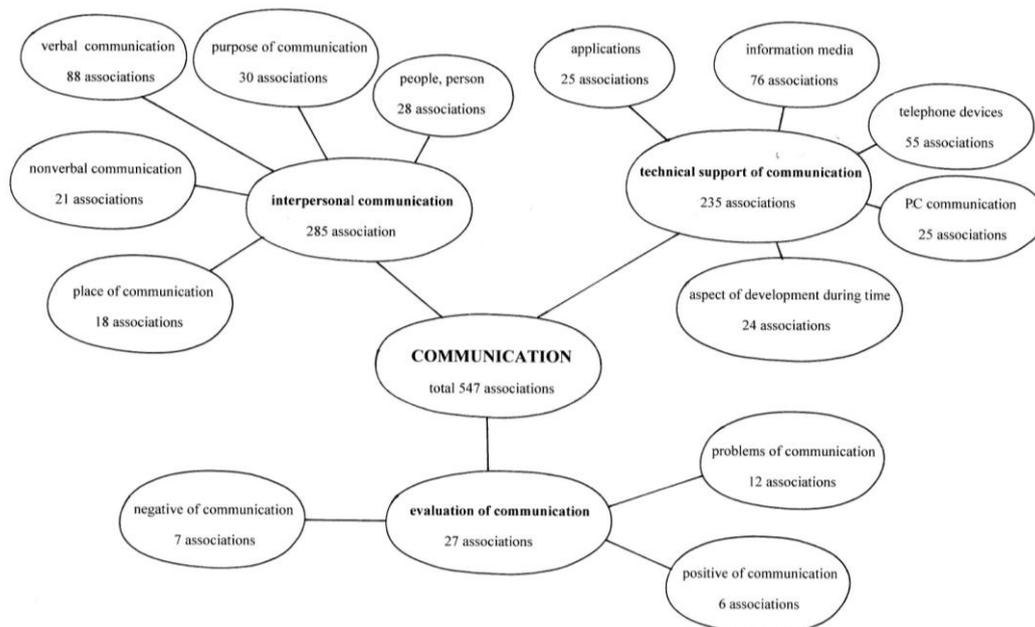


Figure 1 represent fictitious mental map capturing the obtained results. Source: the author.

3.3. Comparing results with the results of the mind mapping of the term communication

in another group of respondents

The results of the mind mapping of the term *communication* in the presented group of respondents are shown in Table 4 and compared with the results of the mind mapping of the term *communication* in another group of respondents – see Table 5. The group for comparison, even though a smaller one, contained students (men) in the first year of Tax Consultancy field in the Faculty of Business and Management of Brno University of Technology. Also in this group, the mind mapping of meanings of terms was carried out at the beginning of their studies. In total, 13 respondents of the comparison group provided 82 first level associations (the table does not include associations concerning communication among animals – 1 first level association in total – neither associations concerning communication in the sense of transport – 2 associations in total). All 82 first level associations acquired from the comparison group respondents were classified in the same system of categories as those created for the focus group; none of the associations had to be classified as “unclassified associations”.

Table 4 The overview of first level association categories for Managerial Informatics respondents.

Source: the author.

First level associations		Content of the main identified categories
absolute number	relative number	
285	52.10	interpersonal communication
235	42.96	technical support for interpersonal communication
27	4.94	associations with an evaluating aspect
547	100.00	sum of first level associations

Table 5 The overview of first level association categories for Tax Consultancy respondents.

Source: the author.

First level associations		Content of the main identified categories
absolute number	absolute number	
52	63.42	interpersonal communication
23	28.05	technical support for interpersonal communication
7	8.53	associations with an evaluating aspect
82	100.00	sum of first level associations

The comparison of the two groups of respondents supports the above mentioned opinion that the meaning of the term *communication* in the respondents' minds is affected by their dominant field. The associations of the respondents from the Tax Consultancy were connected with interpersonal communication to a higher degree than in the case of the respondents of Managerial Informatics, where on the other hand the associations of the technical support for interpersonal communication were more frequent. The influence of the field studied before entering the current field of study has been confirmed not only in this study into mind mapping of the meaning of the term

communication but also in the results of mapping of other significant terms from the fields of economics and management in our previous study [10], where the process of mind mapping proved that the respondents – future information professionals – in comparison to future managers and entrepreneurs understand the term *informatics* in a wider range of meaning, which can be interpreted as a sign that they are better informed about the meaning of the term.

4. Conclusion

The paper deals with the term *communication* and its understanding by future university graduate professionals in the field of managerial informatics. The meaning of the term in the respondents' minds is explored using a qualitative procedure referred to as mind mapping. The analysis of the obtained individual mind maps identifies categories of associations and classifies the first level associations into three basic categories: communication in the sense of interpersonal communication, communication in the sense of technical support for interpersonal communications, and associations with an obvious evaluating aspect concerning communication. The results of the classification are presented in tables and also visualized in Fig. 1, which represents a fictitious mind map of first level associations.

The classification used for the first level associations predominantly shows the necessity and importance of interpersonal communication in the lives of individuals and the society and, what is more, the influence of respondents' study fields on the meanings associated with the term. Moreover, a negative bias of associations with evaluating aspect concerning communication was identified. This aspect of the evaluation of communication will be further monitored and explored.

As we remembered in the introduction, we cannot avoid communicating. This basic rule of interpersonal communication concerns both personal, family, and social life and also studies and work. The paper presents the understanding of the term *communication* by one group of respondents explored within larger research – it will certainly be interesting to compare the results of the understanding of the term by other groups of respondents; however, these results are not available at the moment. Still, based on the presented results we can recommend the teaching practice of managerial and entrepreneurial study fields to focus both on knowledge and skills related to the psychology of interpersonal communication and its technical support, and also on the clarification, training and emphasis of positive principles and aspects of social contact and interpersonal communication which as a consequence could support effective communication substantially (see also e.g. [1]; [29]: [2]). A similar recommendation can also be given to managers and entrepreneurs who chair various businesses and work meetings including intentional effect on their co-workers.

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