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Editorial

MARCO COLOMBETTI *

THE COMMUNICATION SCIENCES AS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ENTERPRISE

In its first ten years of life, The Faculty of Communication Sciences of University of Lugano has made a strong effort to show that constructive dialogue is possible among students of different fields who share a common interest in analysing, understanding and shaping human communication. The articles included in this volume present a bird's-eye view of the past and current research activity carried out at the faculty. In this editorial I provide a concise introduction to the main themes dealt with by the authors, and then submit a personal view on some questions related to the multidisciplinary approach to research and higher education in the Communication Sciences.

1. Communication Science(s)

During the last century, communication has established as an important field of research. Terms like "Communication Sciences" (in the plural), "Communication Science" (in the singular), "Communication Theory" and "Communication Studies" are by now widely used, often in connection with further qualifications, like in "Media and Communication Studies." Even a superficial analysis of the relevant literature, however, would show that the field is far from showing a unified structure. In the very same year in which USI-Com (the Faculty of Communication Sciences of the University of Lugano) was founded, Anderson (1996) reported that an examination of seven textbooks of communication presented as a whole 249 different theories of communication, only eight-

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een of which where included in more than three books. A few years later, in an attempt to construct Communication Theory as a coherent field of research, Robert Craig (1999) identified seven distinct research traditions (rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, socio-psychological, socio-cultural, and critical), that he proposed to regard as irreducible to each other, but in need of engaging in dialectical relationships.

Of course, the fact that one finds 249 different theories concerning aspects of communication does not mean that there are really 249 theories *of* communication, possibly fighting to become *the* theory of communication. But nobody would deny that, at least in the present situation, we would not be justified in considering communication as a unified subject of scientific research. At the moment, the study of communication is at best a multidisciplinary enterprise, and we have to live with that and make the best out of it. In its first ten years of life, USI-Com has made a strong effort to show that constructive dialogue is possible among students of different fields who share a common interest in analysing, understanding and shaping human communication. This volume presents the points of view of most current professors of our faculty, followed by concise descriptions of specific research projects. The scenery emerging from this collective self-portrait is, we feel, rich and stimulating; but rather than the conclusion of a ten-year long journey, it should be regarded as a starting point for future developments.

In the next section I shall say a few words on the articles contained in this volume. In Section 3 I shall discuss a few problems stemming from the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach to research and higher education. Finally, in Section 4 I shall submit some (admittedly provisional) conclusions.

2. A Traveller's Guide

In this section I provide a concise traveller's guide to the full papers included in the volume, by describing the main territories of the communication sciences explored by their authors: the contexts of communication, the effects of communication, communicative competence, and communication technologies.

2.1 *The contexts of communication*

In the nine full papers of this volume the contexts of communication play a foremost role. On the one hand, several authors focus their atten-

tion on specific contexts: Lorenzo Cantoni concentrates on educational settings, strategies, and technologies; Francesco Lurati & Martin Eppler analyse corporate and knowledge communication within organisations; Giuseppe Richeri discusses a number of issues for media communication in the context of the enterprises, the public, and the state; Stephan Russ-Mohl submits a view of journalists as rational decision-makers in the context of media communication; and Peter Schulz discusses several research projects in the context of health communication.

On the other hand, some authors discuss the very notion of a communication context: Eddo Rigotti & Andrea Rocci propose a general analysis of the concept of context, distinguishing between its institutionalised and its interpersonal components; and Antonella Carassa presents joint activities as the contexts in which the role of personal features (intersubjectivity, knowledge, motivations, and emotions) in communication processes can be understood.

2.2 The effects of communication

The effects of communication are obviously a main concern of the Communication Sciences: given that human communication is a form of purposeful activity, typically carried out to achieve some result, it is essential to understand what factors allow an individual or an organisation to communicate successfully.

In this volume the effects of communication are directly dealt with by a number of authors: Lorenzo Cantoni is concerned with the factors that influence the effectiveness of educational communication; Francesco Lurati & Martin Eppler stress the importance of a clear distinction between strategic and tactical communication, and analyse the role of knowledge communication for effective organisational action; and Peter Schulz discusses how to achieve optimal communication with respect to the goal of maximising health outcomes.

2.3 Communicative competence

Communicative competence is a main theme of the communication sciences: at all levels (interpersonal, group, corporate, institutional, political, and so on) the failure to achieve one's goals through communication may be a consequence of poor communication competence.

This issue is mainly discussed in two articles of this volume. Lorenzo Cantoni considers both the educators' competence to communicate within different educational setting and with different communication technologies, and the role of education in teaching communicative competence. Edo Poglia discusses the problem of extending intercultural communication competence from the interpersonal level to public, educational, and media communication: his I2C model (Improving Intercultural Communication) is intended to provide a firm conceptual reference aiming at improving intercultural communication at all levels.

2.4 Communication technologies

The term “technology” may have a broad or a narrow reading. In a broad sense, communication technology is the totality of technical devices that are put to use in a communicative process. This broad interpretation of the term is adopted by Lorenzo Cantoni, who presents the two-way relationship between communication and education: on the one hand, all viable technologies are, and should be, exploited in educational settings; on the other hand, education in the field of communication aims, as a main concern, at conveying the ability to master all kinds of communicative technologies.

In a narrower sense, “technology” refers to the world of today’s digital computers, or ICT (Information and Communication Technology). Given the importance of ICT in our current world, it will come as no surprise that several articles of this volume deal with digital communication technologies. In particular, Marco Colombetti & Paolo Paolini discuss the current function of computers as powerful means of human interaction; Lorenzo Cantoni comments on the use of ICT in education; Antonella Carassa stresses the importance of technological artefacts as mediators of human collective activities; Francesco Lurati & Martin Eppler are constantly aware of the importance of technologies and of technological competence in corporate communication; and Peter Schulz highlights the important role of the internet in the area of health communication.

3. Multidisciplinary Approaches to Research and Higher Education

If we want to understand the pros and cons of a multidisciplinary approach, we have to distinguish between research and higher education

and, as far as the latter is concerned, between fundamental education, professional education, and training for research.

Let's start with research. I believe that we should distinguish between *interdisciplinary* and *multidisciplinary* (or *cross-disciplinary*) research efforts. Being interdisciplinary, I submit, involves creating a new conceptual framework, drawing from and building upon the conceptual schemes of different disciplines. Psycholinguistics, Neurolinguistics, and several areas of Cognitive Science are good examples of interdisciplinary fields. Multidisciplinary research may well be less ambitious, and be content with the simultaneous application of different conceptual schemes to the same object of study, with no attempt to produce a brand new conceptualisation. Of course, mixing elements from different recipes requires a good cook, lest the resulting dish should be inedible. But with certain very complex objects of study, like human communication, it seems that no single discipline would be able to host an exhaustive account.

The case with higher education is, I believe, more problematic. Here I shall consider the universities that, like USI-Com, follow the so-called Bologna model, and therefore offer a three-year Bachelor programme, a two-year Master programme, and a subsequent PhD programme.

Ideally, a Bachelor programme in Communication Sciences should provide general knowledge on communication contexts, processes, and technologies (in a broad acceptance of the term). Here a multidisciplinary approach seems to be a must. The problem, however, is that the views of different disciplines are often juxtaposed without any effort to show how they could be effectively integrated: the burden of synthesis is left on the students' shoulders, which may not be enough robust for the job. At USI-Com we are currently engaging in an effort to design genuinely multidisciplinary education.

At the Master level, professional issues become more cogent. Typically this involves narrowing down multidisciplinary approaches to less broad but deeper treatments. In this sense, Master-level education is far less problematic than Bachelor-level teaching.

PhD-level education poses different problems. Here the main issue is training for scientific research. It is therefore mandatory to take into account the high, sometimes extreme, degree of specialisation required in current research. A broad educational programme seems therefore incompatible with doctoral studies. However, specialisation does not necessarily involve following the paths traced out by traditional disci-

plines. We should never forget that scientific disciplines are more the territories of academic politics than ways of carving Nature at its joints: some courage in crossing disciplinary borders is often necessary to invent innovative and productive ways of looking at old objects. But this fact brings about great responsibility for the academic establishment, which is called to take a free and broad-minded attitude toward disciplinary innovation. That this is often not the case is well known to many people working in the field of research. In this respect, we think that USI-Com has followed, and hopefully will continue to follow, the right track. The short papers contained in this volume supply significant evidence that this is the case.

4. Conclusions

In spite of the difficulties outlined in the previous section, we feel that the ten-year long work of USI-Com's professors and researchers illustrates a viable solution to the problem of building a multidisciplinary approach to the Communication Sciences. Although people at USI-Com come from different disciplines, countries, and academic traditions, it appears from the papers published in this volume that a remarkably common view of human communication is being developed. This view considers communication as a situated activity carried out by individuals, in the context of specific interpersonal relationships and institutional environments, aimed at achieving certain types of collective effects at the level of dyads, groups, organisations, or society at large.

The integration of different research traditions into a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach can only proceed bottom-up, as actually happened at USI-Com. Although a collective effort, such an enterprise calls for specific individual qualities: enough courage to jump over the walls built to protect old academic traditions; strong creativity to invent new ways of looking at things; and even stronger scientific rigour, because a careless mixture of ingredients is likely to produce unpalatable cocktails.

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