

Noise in Contemporary Distance Education

**eCampus Colloquium
Dothan Campus
Troy University
April 16, 2008**

**Hal W. Fulmer, Ph.D.
Associate Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies**

I. Introduction

- **Thank You's: Dr. Deb Gearhart/Mrs. Kim Shaver**
- **It's a great treat to have the opportunity to participate in the eCampus Colloquium for 2008**
- **Communication professors (my life before "the Dark Side") live for a chance to give a presentation.....and to get the chance to talk about communication is even better!**
- **Today, I want to share some thoughts on an issue that affects all of us, both professionally and personally**
- **It is an issue which has been with us, quite literally, since the very beginning of the human experience**
- **The issue is what happens to a message as it leaves the person who sends that message and it travels to the person or persons who are the intended (and sometimes unintended) receivers of that message.**
- **In short, as M-1 travels along whatever channel is conveying it, how does it become M-2? Why is it that the message we intended to send is often NOT the message that our audiences perceive?**
- **For those of us in Higher Education, this is a daily vexation. And for those of us who work in what is commonly called "Distance Education," it is a problem which challenges our efforts to reach our students with necessary information and required course knowledge....and it is a problem which confronts as those same students attempt to communicate with us.**
- **Today, I'd like to visit on the topic of "Noise in Contemporary Distance Education"**
- **This is a subject I have had the chance to study, to think about, to write about and to live with for over 25 years as a communication professor. The good news is that I get to work on this issue every day!**
- **To get at this topic this morning, I plan to look at four key points:**
 - **One definition of Noise**
 - **Five Traditional Types of Noise**
 - **Three Emerging Issues of Noise which affect us in Distance Education**
 - **A Few Final Thoughts on the Resolution of Noise**

I. A Definition of Noise

- **Noise is *anything* that interferes with the successful transmission and completion of a message**
- **Noise is *anything* that cause M-1 (the message I was trying to send) to become M-2 (a different message received by any intended or unintended audiences)**
- **This is a broad definition and means that “noise” is more than a physical condition (as we shall see)**
- **The earliest communication models of the 1950s (Shannon-Weaver), based on a mechanical model of a telephone, noted the impact of “noise”**
- **Plato noted that persons who were set free from his allegorical Cave could not effectively communicate with those still imprisoned in the Cave because there was “interference” between the two groups**
- **Today, even though we may not call it by this title of “noise”, this intrusive element of communication costs us time and money, drains our reserves of emotional capital and affects our chances for personal and professional achievement.**

II. The Five Traditional Types of Noise

- **Physical**
 - **The most “typical” of the types and the most obvious**
 - **The problems associated with this type of noise: incomplete information and the need for increased energy to overcome the physical noisiness**
 - **We live in a noisy world: at home, at the workplace, in the car: cell phones ring with an amazing array of ring tones, printers print voluminous amounts of material, computers play our own downloaded music or the music of a far-flung radio station or the emails which chirp and giggle or snort or snore or hum or chuckle as they make their rounds through our vast cybernetic post office.**
- **Physiological**
 - **BUT: we also encounter noise which is generated by our own bodies**
 - **We don’t communicate very well when we are tired or thirsty or hungry: Maslow was right! The basic needs are the most important ones!**
 - **Yet we live in a world where our eating habits are far from desirable, our sleep habits are even poorer, and we spend the day on a kind of monster roller coaster, dashing from sugar high and caffeine high through the crushing crash of their depletion to the next high as we visit the snack machines: which now dispense “Energy Drinks” (Brittany!) and even “Vitamin Water”!**
 - **This problem is compounded by the global reach of Troy University. Our own personal “optimal” time of day may be early morning... but it’s only early morning here in Dothan. In Malaysia, it’s tomorrow and it may not be morning.**

- In short, we suffer from physiological noise from our own bad habits, but these are compounded by the complex rhythms and cycles of Troy University faculty, staff, and students who live, quite literally, all across the world. If it's always 5 o'clock somewhere, it's also always 8:00 a.m. somewhere and sometimes the "5:00 is trying to communicate with the 8:00"!
- **Psychological**
 - We also are affected by our psychological states.
 - If we're worried or frustrated or distracted, we don't communicate as well
 - Again, consider the complexity of the persons involved with Troy University all across the globe... and the likelihood that everyone, all at the same time, are practicing Bobby McFerrin's mantra of "Don't Worry, Be Happy"!
 - Quite the opposite: for many of us, by the time a person has reached us, he or she has journeyed through a number of individuals, has told their story multiple times, and perhaps has grown increasingly frustrated.
 - We live and work in a world where there are lots of issues which affect people's lives and which can create this kind of noise
 - If Zu-Zu Bailey in "It's A Wonderful Life" was right, then every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings. For many of us, every time the phone rings, we can expect someone experiencing, at least to some degree, some measure of psychological noise.
- **Perceptual**
 - Our messages are also affected by our perceptions: Those that we have of our receivers, those that our receivers have of us, and those that we have of ourselves as well as those that our receivers have of themselves.
 - Confusing? You bet it is!
 - Every time we communicate, we're dealing with at least four people: There is the "me" that I think of when I think of myself: all of who I believe I am, hope I am, wish I am...and this "me" may or may not mirror any kind of objective reality. This "me" is full of beliefs, values, rules, roles, norms, histories, experiences, and knowledge... all of it filtered and all of it desperate to make some kind of holistic sense so that I can avoid the twin demons of chaos and cognitive dissonance
 - That's just the first person in this group of four
 - There are three others: the person or persons I think I am communicating with (the "other") as well as the person or persons who are the receivers and what they think of themselves and what they think of me.
 - Communication is hard enough when I'm speaking over the backyard fence to a long-time neighbor that I know and trust. Imagine what

happens to the noise when we include the different perceptions of people from different parts of the state of Alabama, from places within the South but outside of Alabama, from places in the United States outside the South and from places outside of the United States. Perhaps the miracle is that we can communicate at all!

- **Protogorical**
 - **A final traditional type of noise takes its name from the ancient philosopher Protagoras who was interested in the power of words.**
 - **Our very language creates potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication.**
 - **The great literary critic Kenneth Burke once noted that the power of language was in its ambiguity, which may be true but clearly that same ambiguity is what gives rise to confusion and problems.**
 - **As we attempt to reach those persons who live farther and farther away from us, we deal more and more with this issue.**
 - **Consider the words “drop” and withdraw”: we understand the difference: the first one means we are no longer in a particular class; the second one means we are no longer at the University. But to a student (or an outsider), these words may seem interchangeable**
 - **The issue of “overload” and what constitutes “hours per semester” for undergraduates (the “semester block of time” issue)**
 - **Universities are burdened with very technical language and lots of jargon (try sitting through a Registration Management Committee meeting!)**
 - **In short, our words, in their technical state or jargonistic state or slang state or even their most formal state, don’t mean the same thing to everyone at the same time.**

III. Some Thoughts on Four Emerging Types of Meta-Noise

- **Transcultural Communication**
 - **Increased communication with differing and different cultural groups: geographical, demographic, cybernetic**
 - **These create very real perceptual and protogorical noise**
 - **This is the world of Troy University: the world really is flat for Troy University**
 - **“time” and “space” don’t exist for us like they once did and how we think of “time” and “space” has to be different**
 - **A Troy Campus student, taking an eCampus class, from a professor who physically located in Europe is a very different world from the one that many of us knew when we first entered higher education**

- **Mechanical and Technological**

- **Speed of our communication systems, including our computer systems**
- **The issue of bandwidth and storage (Alvin Toffler: PowerShift)**
- **I-Phones and BlackBerries: Information Overload (can you switch yours off? Theme of the novel, “Power Play”)**
- **Technological overload: physical and psychological noise: When are we ever disconnected? Is it healthy to be constantly connected? Do we know what it means to “sign on” and never “sign off”? Television stations today versus the ones we grew up (National Anthem and test patterns told us it was time to go to bed)/ (Ted Turner and CNN’s “sign off” at the end of the world)**

- **Creation of New Knowledge and Social Networking**
 - **Web 1.0 vs. Web 2.0**
 - **“Knowledge” is “out there” on the web, ready to be created and not just accessed: Blogs and Wikis and Social Networks**
 - **But it is a different kind of “knowledge”: where all of us can play the role of “expert” and where much of our information may become an indistinguishable blend of fact and fiction. And where, through FaceBook or MySpace or some other similar place, we can present ourselves as whomever we want to be. We can become our own creation in ways that were much harder, if not possible, before**
 - **Such knowledge is being contrasted with the demise of what is being called the “Gutenberg Parentheses”: the time between interpersonal communication and our current ability to communicate when texts (the written word) dominated**
 - **Or as Marshall McLuhan’s model noted, we have moved from the tribal through the Gutenberg to a re-tribalized worlds where individuals can connect individually and knowledge is passed along by word of mouth, if not text message**
 - **What we now have are new ways to THINK and new ways to EXPRESS what we are thinking and what we are developing are new languages for this thinking and this expressing**
 - **Through Social Networking, we have in place not just new ways of thinking but new ways of problem-solving, where the efforts of the connected group can be focused on a single task and where the group can respond like a single individual**
 - **It really does matter that for many of us, and especially for our students (and particularly the traditionally-aged students), we no longer read exclusively in a vertical fashion. We are “horizontal readers”. That 90-degree shift is profound**
 - **This new knowledge and new conceptualizations and new languages has also changed what “privacy” means. What constitutes “privacy” in a world where, quite literally, almost everything can be recorded and transmitted?**

- **Even more so: the shift in “privacy” is creating a shift in what constitutes “private property”. In the world of Web 2.0, community is paramount. With such a shift comes a challenge to our existing understanding of what constitutes “plagiarism.”**
- **Our noise battles in the world of Web 2.0 will be fought along the perceptual lines.... Especially as we increasingly are confronted with how to define “information”. The line between fact and opinion, between some kind of objective reality and the interpretation of that reality in a blog or a wiki or a My Space site, will increasingly blur.**

IV. Three Concluding Thoughts on The Resolution of Noise

- **Noise has always been with us, from that first miscommunication between Adam and Eve in the Garden until the present day and it’s especially present as we teach in an eCampus environment. Further, noise is always evolving and we have to evolve in our efforts to identify it and confront it**
- **Awareness (and labels) don’t necessarily make the noise go away, but there is power in knowledge and being aware is a first step toward understanding the problems which affect our communication efforts**
- **Finally, there is no such thing as “zero noise”. So our goal is not noise elimination but rather “noise management”. The better able we are to manage the various elements of noise which confront us (and we can do this as we recognize these various forms that noise will take), the better able we are to successfully reduce the noise levels downward and our communication successes upward**

V. Conclusion

- **It has been my pleasure to be with you today**
- **It’s my hope that spending a few minutes talking about noise, in its traditional forms and in its emergent forms, has some benefit for you**
- **As a final thought, the elements of noise that we discussed today, are also elements that describe us as humans and that mark our passage into new and exciting worlds of creation, discovery, and sharing. To communicate means we’ll encounter some noise in our transmission. Our goal is to never let the noise overwhelm our message and it’s with that hope that I wish you the very best successes, personally and professionally and that I offer you my thanks for all you do on behalf of Troy University.**