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Informal Communication in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract. Higher education in Romania has a long tradition to serve the academic, cultural, scientific life, but it is little known about the information transfer throughout informal channels of communication taking place within its institutions. The article aims to show the importance of information transmitted through informal channels in higher education institutions in Romania and to present aspects of informal communication. The article also approaches aspects such as what is informal communication in a higher education institution, and why is this type of information used among the members of the community of a higher education institution. The main purpose of the article is to analyze the informal communication channels in the university environment and their impact on the official communication, respectively on the general institutional performances.

Keywords: informal communication, information, informal channels of communication, higher education

Introduction

Did you hear? / I heard...

It is true?

I have to tell you something

Why informal channels of information? (including the rumor, the gossip, the traffic of influence, the characterization of people...) Because they represent an exceptional manipulation and a control tool and, as much as we would like not to get stuck in their net, we are still trapped into, without realizing it. As working material: it will never run out. It is comparable to the epidemics that spread

amazingly quickly and, after the ravages are extinguished and no one takes them into account, it provides fast feedback which helps to improve the activity.

It is much easier for people to communicate inside their comfort zone: they express themselves freely, and no longer try to choose their words. Their own chosen expressions and language show relaxation, trust in the interlocutor, and they are no longer restrained, and thus the obtained information helps to anticipate what will happen. The speed of the information spreading through certain informal channels is astounding, compared to the speed of the extension of formal information which is generally too slow.

There are also cases where the information is not conveyed horizontally, but only vertically, and the people directly involved in the fulfillment of the goals are deprived of access to information, which affects the efficient fulfillment and the purpose of the task. Somewhere, formal communication encounters obstacles and drawbacks, almost, at the level of the department heads, a fact that leads to another problem: the incorrect decoding of pieces of certain messages that reach certain people leading to errors of interpretation.

The most obvious quality of a human being is the way he/she communicates. The attraction for the cancan, for the story itself, always defines the human curiosity which leads to the way thoughts, opinions or information are shared or exchanged in writing or speaking. Communication may be intentional or unintentional; it may involve conventional or unconventional signals or it may take linguistic or non-linguistic forms; additionally, it may occur spontaneously (spoken or otherwise). (Constantinescu, 2005-2006)

Both informal and formal communication have their own set of characteristic features. For the sake of simplicity of understanding, it depends only on the situation and the way the communication is conveyed. There are numerous circumstances that involve various situations of communication with specific requirements and rules, regarding how and when it is needed to be informal or formal. (Constantinescu, 2005-2006)

First, attention must be focused on how people have been interested, in no particular order, in the practical conditions surrounding communication, in its contribution to prevent conflict, in the basic values that are disseminated (shared) throughout its promotion, and in the stereotypes that could make communication difficult amongst human relationships generally, or when people start to communicate.

Now, for a more practical approach, to obtain a more profitable research into the laws of human action, and to obtain solutions that can be put into practice, we must pay particular attention (or, at least, this is the formal intention) to "*Informal communication in a higher education institution*".

Literature review

A way to study informal communication is to give an image of how information is transmitted, to what direction and where it is differentiated, of how developed the sense of community is, and to show the degree of division in the university environment.

The fundamental principle and foundation of communication is the information. It should not be ignored that information is also the essence of professional and personal development.

According to the encyclopedic communication dictionary (Petcu, 2014, p. 256), information is what reduces uncertainty, the set of data that one receives about an object, a phenomenon, an event. But like communication, information has a wide range of interpretations. The notion of information is difficult to define, due to its abstract nature, its diverse spread and wide use, but also due to the complex meanings and the ones recently acquired (Porumbeanu, 2006, p. 13). As defined by Duncan and Moriarty (1998), "information – the product of communication – is the tie that binds in any relationship".

Information and access to information have become progress factors for all the fields in any activity (Porumbeanu, 2006, p. 13); therefore, its transfer goes through a whole series of interpretations; some interpretations seek solutions and follow the novelty. The need for information is a need that has become acute, throughout which the user and the informant can control their informational dimension of existence and at the same time can ensure their development.

Communication – What does it mean? Trying to give a clear definition of the term of communication and looking for the specialized literature, there is an abundance of possible ones. Here are some of them:

- "*Communication can simply be defined as sharing – sharing a set of informational signs.*" (Willett, 1992, p. 81) (*apud* Drăgan, 2007, p. 18);
- "*Communication is the human activity that links people together and creates relationships.*" (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998, pp. 1-13).

To a great extent in terms of its description, the concept of communication is a giving, transmitting process, a message, a transfer, information sharing, ideas and feelings, an overall activity – the whole process playing an important role in the development and the image of an institution.

The definition of communication takes into account the large numbers of angles from which it is viewed, rendering those representative dimensions an importance in the study of the authors.

If, for some authors, communication involves “an understanding of the complex processes of socializing and constructing the world view, the attitudes, values and norms of individuals” (Seeley, 2000, *apud* Launikari and Puukari, 2005), for others, communication is “the negotiation process of senses between people belonging to different cultures, revealing the rules of social interactions, and making different concessions and refusals to reach an agreement in the ideal way to reach the purpose of communication, which is mutual understanding” (Launikari, 2005). This occurs “whenever we communicate with people from other groups that we perceive to be different” (Dodd, 1991, *apud* Launikari, 2005). The current context gives individuals the opportunity to interact with different civilizations, cultures, ethnicities or minorities more than ever in the past and the elements related to difference are: the language of communication, how to dress, how to greet, the attitude to work, how to party in leisure time, people’s punctuality, their professionalism, etc. In other words, the act of communication is very important for the relationships between members and institution.

Officially, formal communication is easily recognized, but, for a good working environment, the institution needs both formal and informal communication.

Being outside the formal channels of communication, informal communication occurs spontaneously, appears to be uncontrolled, constantly changing and it is formed at all structures of the institution. What is important can be neither forbidden, nor suppressed. An advantage of these information channels is that they provide fast and optimal feedback. Longenecker claims (1969) that feedback is needed to quantify how much the message was understood, believed, accepted.

Informal communication channels contribute to the activities of the institution; everyone listens, acts and participates in this communication network, either consciously, or without giving too much importance.

Informal communication is an ongoing process that allows us to analyze the reaction and its impact of a new wave of information on people. The importance of

informal communication is largely placed in the background, and it represents the essential role it can play in the development of the institution.

Certain sources of information are preferred to formal ones. Why are they favorite? It is a question with multiple answers, answers that can shape the image of an institution. We can say that the academic environment has a double life: official and unofficial. If the first is rigorous since it respects certain rules for the smooth running of things, the second is the life of creating friendships, and relationships that can be added to the value of professional and personal existence where everyone wants to acquire something in particular, where, if you are not informed, you risk staying behind. This information is not official, and it goes through certain stages; it is the daily information, the information we need to understand the experience we live, that issue that is analyzed at every moment a day by the personal reflection. (Muchielli, 2005, p. 38)

Informal communication involves the existence of a small number of participants, which is equally the cause and its effect of a group solidarity. (Lesenciuc, 2017, p. 58)

The essence of a group life is a dynamic interrelation between several elements: activities, feelings, norms, interactions and communication. The feelings of attachment between the members in the group are born from contact and cooperation; interaction and intercommunication lead to the acquisition of common norms and an attachment of the type of solidarity towards the group; the kinds of communication that appear meanwhile reflect and support a structure of status differences within the group and a certain distribution of members' sense of attachment to one another. (McQuail, 1999, p. 105 *apud* Lesenciuc, 2017, p. 58)

Information is the foundation of professional activity and knowledge; moreover, it is a good that is sold and bought (...), but it is not a good like any other, and it must (...) be analyzed, treated and evaluated by more than one perspective. (Porumbeanu, 2006, p. 16)

According to Ion Stoica (2013, p. 5, 10), the coordinates of performance and quality inexorably pass through information management and include the vision, the overall thinking, the structures, the relationships, the means and the resources that determine the links of information with the past, with the present and with the future, (*apud* Banciu and Rădoi, p. 16) by systematizing and prioritizing the understanding and the knowledge related to the inclusion of society and individuals in the fundamental processes of development. (Stoica, 2010, p. 41 *apud* Banciu and Rădoi, p. 68)

Conclusion

Communication, formal and informal, is a long process with advantages and disadvantages. Communication is a dialogue, a communion that is shared where everyone is in a relationship with the others, with ourselves, with the *world* and “does not impose one's opinion against the others’ opinions or adds one's opinion to the others’ opinions as in a meeting.” The dialogue transforms them both. A successful dialogue is one of such nature that cannot fall back into the dissension which it first emerged from. Communion, which is familiar to us to such an extent, that it is no longer either my thinking or your thinking, but a common state of interpreting the world, makes moral and social solidarity possible for the first time. (Gadamer, 2001, pp. 497-498).

To sum up, formal is informal and informal is formal in the activities undertaken in institutions.

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