

# Communication from a Pragmatic Perspective

*Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession*

*Dewey 1916. p. 11.*

## Background

Through working with my PhD thesis in which I look at communication of aesthetics in the Swedish compulsory school, dissatisfaction has grown regarding the word communication. The first problem I stumbled upon was to come to terms with the word aesthetics, since at the time when I formulated the title of the project I was fairly certain I knew what communication was. Through reading up on theories on aesthetics I found that communication was also quite puzzling. Some things were clear to me such as language being an agreement between participants in a society and that total understanding of one another through the symbols we used for communication, language, is impossible. Despite this we do not completely misunderstand each other either, but rather that the closer we are in time and space, the easier communication becomes. All this was fairly clear and still holds true, but other things started to puzzle me such as: How can a piece of art communicate and does participants in a communication have to be directed towards each other? Since I had found the thoughts of Dewey and Shusterman to be of help in my search for a holistic view on aesthetics, I decided to see if they could help me with the problem of communication as well. The purpose of this paper is in other words to present the solution to these questions provided to me by pragmatism in the line of Dewey and Mead.

## The Problem

Communication is the tool we have for exchanging thoughts and feelings, to be defined and formed as the persons we evolve as. Through communication our actions, thoughts and feelings are confirmed and strengthened as well as rejected and put down. Through our lives we use symbols for trying to interpret one another, interact with each other and thereby using each others as mirrors where we reflect to be able to adjust.

Interaction and other words such as dialogue, speech and conversation are very similar in meaning to communication. One possible way of attacking the task of understanding what communication is could be to demarcate it from these related words. As this is a paper about pragmatic views on communication I will rather try to discuss what communication is rather than what it is not. Is communication always between communicating parties directed towards each other, reciprocally exchanging ideas, or is it still communication if one person talks and another one is in the same room not paying attention? A part of the same problem is if it is possible to communicate across time. Can Beethoven communicate something to me – or is it possible to imagine that Beethoven and I actually communicate in some way or another? Does communication require reciprocal interaction or does one-way communication exist? Are both monologue and dialogue parts of communication? Other questions in this respect are whether communication can have different quality, and to what extent it is possible to transfer our intended meaning in communication.

## Why Pragmatism?

Pragmatism has never been a clearly defined and unified group of people calling themselves

Pragmatists and being united on everything. This makes it important to clarify who in particular forms the theoretical base each time I use pragmatism as a reference. In this paper Dewey in particular, but also his friend Mead as well as to some extent the contemporary Shusterman will help me come to terms with some problems regarding communication. These thinkers provide me with tools for grasping the complex phenomenon that constitutes our being in the world: Communication.

Communication is one of philosophy's great problems and has been written about from several different angles. The most prominent philosophical theories in this day and age are different brands of analytical philosophy which by trying to find and define all parts of a phenomenon and thereby demarcate it from the rest of the world, while at the same time proposing that it is an integrated part of the world, analyses philosophical problems. Pragmatism is a kind of alternative path to this atomistic approach while not going to the extreme opposite position, whatever that may be. Shusterman (2000) points out that pragmatism no longer owns this in between hegemony as newer philosophers as Goodman, Bourdieu and Davidson have taken similar stands. While Dewey has indeed had a tremendous impact on the educational development, the pragmatic way of relating to the world has had little impact on the philosophical development through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

My interest in communication stems from an interest in aesthetics which Dewey wrote about passionately. And the word "passionately" describes well where pragmatism stands out from the crowd as I see it. Emotions and feelings play no part in analytic philosophy. All that counts is rational thinking. Pragmatism does not deny the fact that rational thinking should play an important part in philosophy, but it should not be seen as the only way to grasp the complete picture of the world. Dewey's holistic view on aesthetics was, according to Shusterman, dismissed as being a "hodgepodge of conflicting methods and undisciplined speculations" (Shusterman 2000 p. 6) because of an epistemological conflict between pragmatic and analytical philosophy. A pragmatic perspective means to have a holistic view on the world, basing analysis on experience and don't worry about wordgames that makes no difference. von Wright states the question "how does it become then" (von Wright, 2000 p. 47<sup>1</sup>) and calls it the pragmatic question of knowledge. Pragmatism means believing in changing truth rather than no truth at all as in certain post-modern theory, or in complete truth as in positivistic theory.

## Confusion and Solution

According to Mead (1926) communication is about sharing experience. It is therefore a social process requiring at least two persons who wants to put themselves in each others places. To achieve this we use language which is described as a set of symbols of which a social group agrees upon the meaning. Or as Dewey puts it: "[...] one has to assimilate, imaginatively, something of another's experience in order to tell him intelligently of one's own experience" (Dewey 1916 p. 6). In itself this seems simple: Communication is real-time interaction consisting of symbols, which the participants who are directed towards each other, agree upon. They are therefore able to share experience and thereby communicate.

The previous two sentences essentially describe the pragmatic view on communication, but it is not as simple as that. What about phrases like "Van Gogh's paintings communicate sorrow and anxiety"? It would of course be easy to dismiss this meaning of the word communication as not relevant or that it is a common sense and not a scientific meaning, but Dewey actually uses communication in this sense when he writes: "Because objects of art are expressive, they communicate" (Dewey 1943 p. 104). The moment someone experiences something as conveying some sort of meaning of any kind, the work of art communicates whether the artist intends to or not, according to Dewey. Having my previous definition in mind, this makes it difficult to understand

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<sup>1</sup> My translation

what Dewey really means. First of all this kind of communication with or of art is not in real time, and secondly the artist is not directed towards the communicating partner – the audience. To understand this it is vital to understand how Dewey looks upon experience.

Experience according to Dewey is something that has an impact on us and changes us in some way. He says that a lot of interaction between people is of a habitual character and that these everyday transfers of meanings “are so external and partial that we undergo their consequences without integrating them into experience” (Dewey 1934 p. 335). The transfer of meaning through a piece of art is therefore seen as communication because it is not an announcement or a monologue, but instead it creates participation. The audience has to put themselves in the place of the artist and become artists themselves in recreating the meaning of the piece in quite a similar way to the ideal communicating situation described in the first paragraph of this chapter. Dewey describes this as making common something that has been individual, a process which is one of the purposes or at least consequences of communication. To connect back to two of the initial questions, whether Beethoven can communicate something to me or if Beethoven and I communicate with each other, the answer is yes to the first question and “it’s not that simple” to the second. Beethoven has not been directed towards me when he composed the music I listen to, but he has had some kind of audience in mind, and the music represents something he communicates whether he wants to or not, since it provides an aesthetic experience to people, and thereby changes them. We communicate in some way because we share the experience, but at the same time the experiences are not the same, being experienced in different times by different people. As is the case with so many questions of this kind, it is not a question of yes or no as an answer to whether Beethoven and I communicate, but rather that to a certain extent we communicate, but not the same way and to the same extent as two people who know each other well communicates.

Initially I also raised a question about quality of communication, and the end of the previous paragraph might indicate that there is a difference in the quality of communication dependant on how well we know the person(s) we communicate with. In the beginning of the paper I presented a similar pre-understanding of communication when I said that nearness in time and space provided for better conditions for communication. Dewey, being wiser than I am, does not seem to agree – at least not fully. In fact he says that communication through aesthetic experience provides something which is as close to genuine communication as one can get: “Now art is the most effective mode of communication there is” (Dewey, 1934 p. 286). Because art makes common not only intellectual issues, but in fact involves the complete meaning in communication. This is a beautiful thought, but as far as I can see, involves one problem, namely the issue of understanding. According to Mead (von Wright, 2000) meaning is created in social relations through communication. Combining this with Dewey’s notion of making common it is difficult to see that the artist, in my example Beethoven, as being a part of this common generation of meaning. He was the initiator, and as he lived he probably communicated both with the piece of music as well as with people experiencing it. But what then? When he died the common experience, his art, did not die with him, but continued to develop through new interpretations, different people in different societies experiencing it in new ways and therefore giving it new meaning dependant on their previous experiences and frames of reference. Is still Beethoven communicating with us then, or is a piece of art self sufficient once it has left the creators home and entered the path to become common? While I have found no discussions of this in the texts I have read, I think the answer must be yes. As when a sentence leaves our mouths it can be adopted and used in new contexts and through time maybe come to mean something quite different to what I intended it to mean in the first place. The commonness of an experience changes, and while our knowledge about the originator influences our experience, the originator no longer experiences the change.

This all comes together quite neatly as I see it. At least until I take into account one of Dewey’s preconditions for communication: Democracy (Dewey 1916/1997). For true communication to take

place people must have equal value and power according to Dewey. This complicates matters. If aesthetical communication is as good as Dewey says, with whom can it communicate? If I interpret Dewey correctly, it is only possible to achieve communication when people belong to the same social system and share ideas and goals. I find this hard to combine with the above argument about Beethoven unless the music works as a continuously new means of communication. In other words that the communicated meaning is constantly recreated in whatever social group it is in, regardless of the originators intentions. This fits in well with Dewey's claim that art is not defined in the object, but rather in the experience (Shusterman, 2000), and it also fits in well with poststructuralist claims that "text's meaning is constantly changing" (Shusterman, 2000, p. 31). This does not mean that the artist is eradicated, but that his or her intentions with the piece will be changed through the experiences of others.

An interesting point in this context is whether the piece of art then becomes a subject in the communication. It is not uncommon that composers, painters, writers and other artists say that they communicate with the art itself in the creative process. The work of art already then starts to live its own life outside of the idea of the artist. The artistic idea then changes through interacting with the art, and like a child developing its own identity and independency and thereby breaking free from the parents, the piece of art starts to live a life by its own<sup>2</sup>.

## **The Even Bigger Picture**

"Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication" (Dewey, 1916. p. 5). With this statement Dewey lifts the discussion to a new level. Not only does communication provide us with tools for understanding and developing individually and in groups, but society exists *in* communication. The fact that there is a group of people in the same time and space does not make a society: For a society to exist people have to share goals, beliefs, history and ideas, and look upon themselves as a group. This cannot happen unless these people communicate since that is the way goals, beliefs, history and ideas are made common. A society where communication is made difficult could therefore be seen as potentially unstable and less rewarding to live in than the democratic society Dewey proposes.

## **Final Words**

Communication means change, perspective and focus directed towards someone, and sharing of experience. Not all three will be equally present at all times, but to some extent they will all be present in situations where communication takes place. There are different shades of communication. In my opinion communication of meaning is not the same as communication between two people. While the first has one setting the agenda and one participating on the protagonists terms, the other has two fairly equally active parties. However they will both be communication, as will other derivatives making common experience on equal terms.

In my observation studies I will be looking at how aesthetics is being communicated in classrooms in a few Swedish compulsory schools. Writing this paper has been a necessary and rewarding experience since I now have an idea about what to look for. I will watch how teachers interact with the pupils regarding aesthetical issues such as value, creativity, beauty, transmission, interpretation and so forth<sup>3</sup>. I will also see how the pupils interact amongst themselves and how experience becomes shared experience. Finally I will see how the teachers and pupils interact with the text in a

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<sup>2</sup> I find no references to this in any of the texts I've read so this is nothing but what I see as a natural consequence of how I experience the pragmatic views on communication.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of aesthetics read my article "One Word to Rule Them?" in *Utbildning och demokrati* nr 1 2005.

broad meaning, whether it is environmental variables, created art or other aesthetical means of expression.

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## Questions for discussion

- I would really like insights into how this discussion on pragmatism's view on communication works in relation to other theories on communication. How do they correlate and where do they crash?
- Which consequences will this view on communication have upon my empirical study?
- Which consequences will an epistemology and ontology based on pragmatism have upon my empirical study?

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