Symbiosis: Rhetorical Triangle theory and the Shannon-Weaver transmission model of communication

Introduction

Technology advancement has changed the way organizations communicate. Organizations no longer use two-three communicational channels as platforms to communicate. These platforms, as technology continues to advance, facilitate how well the audience is able to give the sender feedback. In Porter’s essay, "How can Rhetoric Theory Inform the Practice of Technical Communication?" Porter explains the importance of rhetoric practices within an organization. This research report further confirms Porter’s conclusions that the Rhetoric Triangle is the “framework necessary for [all] work in the field [of communication]” (Porter 141). In addition, this research report also notes that the Shannon-Weaver transmission model of communication cannot be abandoned altogether by organizations because it represents the channel of communication in which how effective organizations implement their rhetoric triangle strategy. Essentially, this research report will explain how viewing the rhetorical triangle and the Shannon-Weaver transmission model of communication as symbiotic is the most effective process to active communication.

The Rhetoric Triangle

Rhetoric theory is used with specific intent, and it “also symbolizes the ‘logics of human relations’” (Huang, Baptista, Galliers) or as Porter simply states, “Look at your audience!” (Porter140). The intent behind the rhetoric theory could be as simple as to generate a piece of user documentation, or as complex as the means to reinforce agreement in situations of uncertainty, such as shaping organizational change in rebranding (Huang, Baptista, Galliers).

Porter states that for most organizational writing/communication, the corporate image is identified through its writing/communication. Figure 1 illustrates the Ethos, “corporate image,” Porter speaks about with regards to organizational writing and how the piece of writing is a collective identity of the organization.
As seen in figure 1, the rhetorical theory is focusing on the product (the message/document). However, Porter also states that if we take a different theoretical lens of using the rhetorical triangle, the sender of the message is better able to start active and effective communication.

These are action or results-oriented questions. What is this system supposed to accomplish? Why—and, very importantly, for whom? . . . Why—or So what? . . . is a key question that should guide all rhetorical events, all writing projects, all document development. (Porter 138)

Thus, the rhetorical theory needs to be persuasive to the sender and the receiver of the message. It requires five interdependent components in order to be active and effective (Huang, Baptista, and Galliers):

1. the rhetor (sender of message)
2. the rhetor’s strategic intent
3. the message
4. the media deployed (channel)
5. the intended audiences

The rhetoric triangle (figure 2) answers the “why, what and how” of active and effective communication within organizations (Huang, Baptista, and Galliers):

- the rhetor’s strategic intent the why
• the message is *what* the rhetor communicates
• the media is *how* that rhetor chooses to communicate the message

Figure 2: Conceptual Components in traditional models of organizational rhetorical practices  
(Huan, Baptista, and Galliers)

The feedback in figure 2 above is represented by a dotted line. “The dotted line . . . is included to indicate the different *possible* ways for rhetors to receive feedback-feedback that can be made available via certain media to certain audiences” (Huan, Baptista, and Galliers). Huan, Baptista and Gallier state “possible ways” because rhetors sometimes do not allow room for feedback from the users, which is one of the mistakes that Max in Porter’s study made by attempting to assert control and concentrating on the document, not the user. However, the rhetor’s goal should be to have a *solid* line of communication for feedback. Huan, Baptista and Galliers explain the importance of feedback, and how rhetors design their rhetoric triangle through two different modes:

Feedback is valuable . . . because [it] can sense how effective their rhetoric has been. . . . [T]he selection and design of the feedback mechanism represents two choices commonly available to a rhetor. [1st] to create the rhetoric for the audience’s passive consumption. To do so, it is crucial for the rhetor to assert control hoping the audience will understand and interpret the rhetoric as intended. [2nd] is a more participative approach than the first one by engaging audiences in real debate and the co-construction of the rhetoric. (Huang, Baptista, and Galliers)

Rhetor’s have to concentrate in creating the 2nd method of feedback. In order to achieve this effectively and actively, the rhetor needs to choose the correct channels of communication. Without the correct channel of communication, your rhetoric is essentially useless. Like Max, in Porter’s example, the rhetor can continue to make changes to a document in hopes that the user understands and interprets the document’s
intended rhetoric. However, the rhetor will continue to make endless changes for as long as s/he continue to assume what the user understands instead of creating a situation where the rhetor can receive direct feedback.

**Shannon and Weaver’s transmission model of Communication**

The Shannon and Weaver transmission model of communication (figure 3 below) is essentially the channel/media being used to communicate the intended message. It does not take into consideration the rhetoric intent or the actual message being delivered. The Shannon and Weaver model is one that gets the message across from point A to point B. If the message makes it to point B, no matter what the message is, then the message is considered effectively delivered.

. . . [T]he transmission model focuses on the most basic aspect of the communication process: the syntactic aspect. IF the syntax (simply the order of words or other data) remains the same from the sender to the receiver, communication has taken place regardless of how different the ideas may be in the minds of the communicators. (Bowman and Targowski)

Therefore, it is important for rhetor’s to view and understand this communication model solely as the channel/media selection for delivering the message.

![Figure 3: Shannon Weaver transmission model of the communication process (Bowman and Targowski)](image)

One weakness that is found with the channel transmission is that the rhetor can control the feedback coming back from the channel. The transmission channel of communication is just as important as the rhetoric intent. For example, if a person wishes to deliver a message to a wide audience, the person will have to consider specific media/channels to effectively and actively reach that specific audience. Channel choices
vary in form. It can be via telephone, e-mail, blogs, wikis, etc. Choosing the correct channel and how the rhetor controls that specific channel feedback will determine whether or not your intended message is communicated effectively and actively.

Huang’s, Baptista’s, and Galliers’ study, concluded that the social media channel of communication implemented into three different organizations was effective and active based on how much control the organizations gave over the feedback channel of communication. Figure 4 below, demonstrates that the DX organization was not effective in their audience feedback because of the DX organization adopted central control on what was being published on the social media channel. The NX organization adopted an open discussion through blogs, which in turn enabled senior managers to adapt more quickly by scanning blog posts and comments on a regular basis. The BX organization, demonstrated the most open use of social media tools (Huang, Baptista, and Galliers).

![Figure 4: Rhetorical flows found in each of the three organizations (Huang, Baptista, and Galliers)](image)

However, it is not just the channel/media being used that makes a difference in the BX organization, it is their rhetoric culture and practices that helps to create a fluidity of communication that is active and effective (Huang, Baptista, and Galliers). Thus, this concludes that rhetoric triangle is just as important as the transmission channel.

**Conclusion**

Organizations and individual employees, such as Max will become most effective in the rhetorical practices when they take into consideration the symbiosis between the Rhetoric Triangle and the Shannon and Weaver Transmission model of communication channel being used. If either form of communication is abandoned or controlled, there will be a lack of effective and active communication and a lot of frustration coming from both the sender and the receiver of the message. Therefore, it is the belief of the author that neither model truly represents an upgrade over the other. A cooperation of both models is needed in order to achieve an effective and active communication.
Works Cited


