Beyond the written word – emerging communication at UniSA

Simon Behenna

October 2008
Aims

• to examine communication practices between University staff members
• to analyse and describe the communications text types, from the perspective of both traditional and digital communication repertoires
• to use Focus Groups to discuss which communication techniques best appeal, and whether it is possible or desirable, to diversify currently standardised techniques
• to report the findings and propose future areas for development
- UniSA is a large, comprehensive, multi campus university with strengths in teaching and applied research.
- 3000 staff (full-time, part-time and casual) and has about 30,000 students worldwide.
- Much of the most formal and corporate-styled communication between the University and its staff originates from the Chancellery.
- Since UniSA’s inception in 1991, communication has rapidly evolved from direct one-on-one verbal communication, and the stability of print based documents, to self-search universal databases and DIY multi-origin/standard-template information flows.
Environmental scan

• Blurred space between our professional and personal lives
• Multiple, easily accessible devices on-hand
• Immediate and excess information is the norm, all the time
• Hyper-expansion of communicative technology creates “info-mania”
• “Collective intelligence” – sharing information and remixing it – Chinese whispers?
• We construct personalities to suit the medium we are using
• We develop an addictive, yet apathetic hunger for prosaic information transmissions
• We resist communication techniques that aren’t easily accessible.
“I’m not really ever offline. I start up the computer when I get here at 9am and the email is always there so I am constantly aware of what’s coming in and what’s going out … and I’ve also got a PDA, so I would’ve checked that over breakfast in the morning and at home in the evening I work into the night. Friday nights and Saturday nights I usually don’t so I quarantine those nights… but the phone is always there because I need that, but I don’t actually access my email Friday nights and Saturday nights. Other than that, all day every day.”

“… it didn’t use to be like this and it’s only getting worse. And everyone knows it’s getting worse but we all make it worse too.”

“I’ve started to try and **not** look at my emails first thing in the morning. Instead I do some actual work! But it’s a terrible temptation to look at them because email is exciting, and you have to look because you might find something interesting!”
Centred within Communication Studies more broadly, using some of the ethnographic sampling and “Focus group” techniques of Public Relations practice to assess user responses to various selected information-text examples, and text-modification styles drawn from experimental writing within Professional Writing to develop text styles to meet the needs of broad user groups.
Methods

- Multi-modal – qualitative and quantitative methods – rich, dynamic data
- A confidential, anonymous questionnaire;
- A focus group
- One-on-one interviews with UniSA staff who are directly involved with the creation and dissemination of “corporate” communications.
My most preferred communication method would always be face-to-face. I always take paper to meetings, not a laptop.

I haven’t had any University training programs associated with managing electronic communications. I do not know of any.

Communications seem to be going 24/7 … you know, I get emails from colleagues at all hours of the day and night … maybe we should have a protocol for no emails outside of office hours unless it’s an emergency.
I don’t expect that we should all be pulled together to be spoken to by the Vice Chancellor or anything like that. So I just accept that email is the formal way that the University communicates with us.

The Blackberry is my primary phone so I am contactable on it all the time. I got rid of my own mobile phone because it’s too confusing.
If there is supposedly such a massive increase in uptake of technology then how come we still get 10,000 people coming to Open Day? Digital or electronic stuff is only supplemented … so TV didn’t kill radio, dvd didn’t kill cinema … it’s all horses for courses… these things just work together…

I don’t have a solution, but I know that we need to find a solution because I know we waste a lot of creative energy when we should be driving the University forward …
Simon Behenna

simon.behenna@unisa.edu.au