Sabbatical (Fall 2015) Report  
Submitted April 2016

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To:          Dr. Susan Brown, Acting Dean, CAS, UH-Hilo  

Below I summarize the book revision project undertaken during the sabbatical leave of Fall 2015. This was my most major focus during the sabbatical leave, though there are other more minor activities that will also be mentioned at the end of this brief report.

Background. For the past fifteen offerings of my section of the COM 200 course, Interpersonal Communication, I have used a manual that I authored titled On Becoming an Attuned Communicator (2009, iUniverse). I have additionally used this volume as supplementary material on three occasions in COM 475, Seminar in Listening. The volume is available on Amazon.com and at the Barnes & Noble site as a paperback (257 pages, $20.95), or as an e-book, and is also distributed through our campus bookstore.

This introductory interpersonal communication volume consistently receives positive reviews from the vast majority of my students due to its student-friendly writing style. Chapters are concise (2-4 printed pages), the language choices tend to be colorful and clear, and the topics chosen and examples used are relevant to students’ everyday communication lives outside the classroom.

Students also seem to enjoy reading and using a manual that was written by the professor who is actually teaching the course. They often say they can hear my voice as they read the assigned material, which personalizes and makes more meaningful the reading and learning experience.

Students also appreciate the student-friendly pricing of the volume, which is one-fourth to one-eighth the cost of most of their other course texts. I believe communication texts are seriously overpriced, and am pleased to offer students a more affordable and user-friendly alternative.

There is also the advantage of a smooth-fit between the required printed material and the actual on-the-ground course content and treatment, which is not always the case when an outside text is adopted. This enhances course design, and results in more seamless delivery.

To provide preliminary data on the readability and value of this manual we might examine the item from our annual UHH course evaluation instrument that requests students to indicate to what extent “Course reading materials facilitated my learning.” For the most recent nine semesters of COM 200 my text has received a greater “Strongly Agree” percentage than did Total Campus scores eight out of nine times (8-1), and exceeding the Total Campus by an average of 17 percentage points. This is a sizable margin. When compared against Humanities Division courses only, again my COM 200 manual was higher eight out of nine times, and by an average margin of 14 percentage points. And if we examine the entire period that the book has been used, since spring 2010, this complete set of comparisons with Total Campus and Humanities Division yields in both cases an 11-2 record favoring On Becoming an Attuned
sections of the Interpersonal course. This along with normal departmental and divisional duties (e.g., I am regularly serving on either the DPC or the TPRC), and activities in the area of scholarship, made it difficult to carve out a sustained period of time to gather momentum on a revision of this book-length project. The requested sabbatical leave permitted this.

Attached to this brief summary I have attached a chapter from the 2009 edition of On Becoming an Attuned Communicator and that same chapter as revised for the most recent edition. One or more of the types of changes mentioned above can be noted from these sample chapters. The original “Table of Contents” and the revised version, attached, will also indicate some of what is referred to above.

Secondly, and on another front, during this sabbatical I wrote 100 first-draft pages on another new book-length project. While I have no solid working title, I am somewhat drawn to “Slow Down, Stand Back, See More.” This would be an interpersonal communication book that would have woven into it recurring strands of “mindfulness” practice. The writing is rough, but it is a first effort to get something down on paper.

To further steep myself in the current “mindfulness” movement I listened to more than 125 hours of pod-casts by a range of mindfulness teachers, and completed a month-long daily mindfulness course. I also read book-length reviews of mindfulness theory and mindfulness research.

I also began and sustained my own daily mindfulness practice during the entire period of the sabbatical leave. Now back in the thrush of campus activity my consistency of mindfulness practice has ebbed somewhat, but multiple times per week I am still participating in inner stress-reduction and self-awareness.

There was also international travel to Laos (Luang Prabang) and Thailand (Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Jomtien Beach) during the sabbatical leave, and this overlapped nicely with the mindfulness interests and pursuits.

Respectfully Submitted,

[Signature]

Ronald D. Gordon
04/12/16
Also by Ronald D. Gordon

*Communicating with the West*  
(with Professor Satoshi Ishii)

**ON BECOMING AN ATTUNED COMMUNICATOR**

*Ronald D. Gordon, Ph.D.*

iUniverse, Inc.  
New York  Bloomington
On Becoming an Attuned Communicator

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For My Dear Children:
Drew, Deva, and Liahna Gordon
"In this immaterial realm of mind there are,
at any moment,
a few indwellers who,
entering into close proximity,
strike flame out of one another
by the intimacy of their communication.
They are the origin
of the loftiest soaring movement
which is as yet possible
in this world."

Dr. Karl Jaspers,
Man in the Modern Age

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As a learner in the area of interpersonal communication you’ll need to give some thought to the human perception process and how it works. This will provide you with a foundation for understanding and handling many of the communication challenges that each and every day will come your way. Knowing how perception generally operates is essential if we’re to optimally shift our communication mind-set in a transformative direction.

We’ll define “perception” as the process of interpreting stimuli that we take-in and experience through any of our five senses. That is, when we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste things and attempt to make sense of them we are said to be “perceiving” them.

First let’s look at the “old-fashioned” model of how perception works, and then contrast it with the more contemporary “transactional” model of perception.

In the “old-fashioned” model of perception, the version that our naïve “common sense” might lead us to adopt, it’s assumed that our eyes are like video cameras and our ears are like audio recorders and we simply “record” external events in our brain exactly as they occur out there in “reality.” We passively capture “reality” through our five senses according to this model. For example, if you speak English and I speak English, then if you say something I should hear it as you said it. You talked, I heard, so communication must have occurred, no problem. This is a “unidirectional” model of how perception works, it says that everything comes straight in at me through my senses like arrows hitting a target. I faithfully “record” stimuli from my environment that impinge upon my senses and that’s it period: seeing (and hearing, etc.) is believing.

But it’s not actually that simple. All of twentieth and twenty-first century cognitive and social psychology tells us that the “old-fashioned” model of how perception works is wrong. This unidirectional model of perception has been replaced by a more sophisticated and research-based model which we’ll refer to as the “transactional” model of perception.

In this view perception is viewed not as an act of “capture” but as an act of “co-creation.” That is, we “sweep out” from our frame of reference and “transact” with the sensory events in our environment. We are ourselves are not merely a passive target being hit by incoming arrows (sensory stimuli) during the process of perception, rather we automatically take ourselves “out and into” what we sense, we transact with it. We don’t only record sensory events, we co-mingle with them, and help to co-create them as we interpret them from the vantage-point of our own frame of reference.

In short, we bring who and how we are to our acts of perceiving. The “transactional” view holds that whatever is “perceived” is a joint function of (a “transaction” between) both the perceiver and that which is perceived.

Since the idea of frame of reference is so central to this model, let’s develop this broad umbrella concept a bit further, so that you get a better hold on it.

Frame of reference is a wide-ranging, broadly inclusive concept. My frame of reference is the bottom-line result of where I’ve been with my life, everything I’ve done and been through, what I believe, who I’ve known, where I’ve lived and traveled, what my personality is like, how old I am, my gender, my political affiliation, my values, my habits, my roles, my culture, my work, my needs, my goals, my prejudices, my hobbies, my philosophies, my rules, my moods, my biology, and whatever. All of this and more constitute my overall frame of reference.

In short, everything we can say about me and my entire life up to this point has produced this frame of reference through which I now experience my external and internal environments. Everything I now see and hear I experience from where I’m standing within my frame of reference. It surrounds me. It’s the portable bubble I carry around with me all the time, and I can’t help but sweep out from it as I perceive people
and events. All that I see, hear, smell, touch, and taste must reckon with and be affected by this frame of reference in which I exist and out of which I operate.

Here's another way to put it: imagine that each person has an invisible picture-type frame that they carry around with them and that they look out at their world through, and that no two people are carrying identical frames. Let's say that one person's frame is one-foot square, made of bright red plastic, and has light pinkish cracked glass; a second person's frame is triangular, three-feet across, wooden, and covered not by glass but by grey gauze with green glitter embedded in it; a third person's frame is oval, made of rusty metal, and is covered with a sheet of magnification glass with a yellowish tint. Now pretend that each of these people can't help but hold their own frame at arm's length, a foot or so out in front of their nose, and that they see everything in the world through it, and nothing beyond the edges of it. Needless to say, the particular frame that each of these persons stands behind will in turn frame and shape the world for them to see. In a sense, they are the prisoner of their frame, as it colors and contours their world as they bring it always and ever with them.

If none of this says it exactly right for you, let's try two more phrasings.

We can say that we each live in two different worlds: the world in front of our nose, and the world behind our nose. And the events that happen in the world in front of our nose get interpreted from within the world behind our nose (i.e., our frame of reference).

Or, we can say this: our vantage point in life (i.e., frame of reference) affects how and what we see and hear: the hawk in the sky and the ant on the ground see different worlds, and what is self-evident to one is not to the other.

If you understand and take to heart the “transactional” model of perception, if you really “get it,” this in turn can affect to a life-changing degree ways you speak and listen. We'll talk about this in the next reading.
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Frame of Reference: Our Portable Perception Lens

Having a simple model of how the perception process works is essential if we are to shift our communication mindset in a transformative direction.

What’s perception? Through our senses we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste things, and attempt to make sense of them. The doing of this we call the perception process. First, let’s look at the old-fashioned model of perception, and then contrast it with the late-20th and early-21st century transactional model of the perception process.

In the old-fashioned model of perception it’s assumed that our eyes are like video cameras and our ears are like audio recorders, and our brain is merely recording external events exactly as they’ve occurred outside of us. Through our five senses we passively capture reality, according to this rather naïve model of the perception process (sometimes referred to as the “naïve realism” model). This is a unidirectional (one-way) model of how perception works: it says that everything rushes straight in at me through my senses, like arrows hitting a passive target. I faithfully record environmental stimuli that enter my senses, and that’s it, period: seeing is believing, hearing is believing, and so on. I experience reality directly: I read a book, I know what’s there; I watch the evening news, I understand what was meant; I listen to a lecture, I know what was said; I witness a car accident, I know what happened. According to a recent University of Illinois study, about two-thirds of Americans still believe in this video camera model of human perception.

But of course it’s not in fact that simple. Late 20th and early 21st century theory and research in the disciplines of communication, cognitive psychology, sociology, social psychology, personality psychology, philosophy, clinical psychology, physics, literary studies, and other academic specializations, tell us that the old-fashioned model of how perception works is wrong. This unidirectional model of perception has been replaced by a more sophisticated and research-based model known as the transactional model of perception.

In this view, we sweep out from our frame of reference and transact with the sensory events in our environment. We are not merely a passive target being hit by incoming arrows (sensory stimuli) during the process of perception, rather we automatically project ourselves into what we sense, and we transact with it. We don’t only record sensory events; we co-mingle with them. We bring all that we are to each and every act of perception, and we interpret what is there from within the vantage-point of our own personal frame of reference. As Dr. Bruce Hood of the University of Bristol has succinctly put it, “The world does not passively impose itself upon our mind; rather it has to be actively interpreted. We do not have direct contact with reality. Our brain is always abstracting and interpreting the world around us.” Dr. Chris Koch of Cal Tech echoes this perspective: “We are incapable of being fully objective, even in our most mundane observations and impressions. Being human means seeing the world through your own constantly shifting lens.” That’s enough to make many of us want to pause, breathe, and center.

We bring who and how we are to our acts of perceiving. The transactional model holds that whatever is perceived is a joint function of both the perceiver and that which is being perceived. In other words, I won’t see exactly the same movie or auto accident you did; we will each get our own versions in our minds, our own simulations based upon our own personal frames of reference, and then each of us will react to our own brain’s simulation.

Since the concept of frame of reference is so central to the transactional model of perception, let’s speak of this far-ranging and broadly inclusive concept (even though it’s
extremely hard to talk about because it has essentially no limits). Let’s at least say that my frame of reference is the result of where I’ve been with my life, including everything I’ve done and been through, who I’ve known, where I’ve lived and traveled, my age, my gender, my politics, my hobbies, my philosophies, my race, my social class, my education, my personality, my beliefs, my rules, my roles, my values, my cultural memberships, my moods, my state of health, my biology, all of this and more comprise my overall and ever-changing frame of reference.

I told you it was a really difficult concept to talk about, because almost anything can become part of my frame of reference, through which I then experience the world. How hungry I am, whether I got a good night’s sleep last night, how my love life is going this week, what the weather is like today, whether my allergies are acting up, good hair day or bad hair day, bills due or not, all of this and more and you begin to see how expansive this umbrella concept of frame of reference can be. The frame of reference concept is so elusive, it’s hard to confine or pin down.

Everything we can say about me and my entire life up to this exact instant has produced my frame of reference through which I’m now experiencing my external and internal environments. Everything I now see and hear and otherwise sense I’m experiencing from where I’m standing, surrounded 360 degrees by my frame of reference. It’s the portable bubble in which I’m immersed, a portable lens that surrounds me, and I sweep out from it as I perceive people and events. All that I see, hear, smell, touch, and taste is affected to some degree by this frame of reference within which I exist, and out of which I live, and move, and act upon the world.

Studies attesting to the importance of our frame of reference in the transactional perception process are endless. Research shows, for example, that when judges in the criminal justice system are making parole determinations in the morning after a good breakfast, they’ll grant about two-thirds of such requests for parole, but late in the afternoon when judges are hungry, and therefore in some discomfort, very few paroles are granted; people who are thirsty will estimate a bottle of water to be closer to them than if they’re not thirsty; people who’ve been jogging and are physically tired will judge a hill to be about one-third steeper than when they’re fresh and energetic; people will savor a chocolate candy for 30% longer if they haven’t been shown a picture of money right before being given the candy; when people are told that a certain creative idea, or work of art, was produced in their own country, they’ll tend to evaluate it more highly than if they are told it has come from another country; male scientists more highly evaluate theories that argue male superiority than female scientists evaluate those same theories; time seems to pass about 20% faster when people are happy than if they’re depressed; people become more prone to irritability and aggressive reactivity under conditions of extreme heat; if you’ve been holding a hot cup of coffee and are then asked to evaluate the personality of a stranger, you’ll rate them as warmer on the “Cold-Warm” scale than if you’ve been holding a cup of iced coffee; in the USA over 300 people have been released from prison on the basis of subsequent DNA evidence that proved them innocent, yet 75% of the time it was faulty eyewitness testimony that claimed “He’s the one, he did it!”

There have been literally thousands of scientific studies that demonstrate that our eyes are not cameras and our ears are not audio recorders. Instead, what we perceive has been shown to be a result of our sweeping out from our frame of reference and engaging in the transactional process called human perception. We look through our own personal perceptual lens and co-create our version of “reality.”

If you understand and assimilate the transactional model of perception, if you truly get it,
it can powerfully change how you think, speak, and listen, and we’ll talk about this in our next reading.