



Dehumanizing Communication Reified among Undergraduates and Lecturers: Issues and Suggestions

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Abstract

This paper discusses dehumanizing communication reified among undergraduates and lecturers. Dehumanization is the act of degrading people with respect to their best qualities and denial of humanness to others. On the other hand, communication is human interaction and learning. Communication becomes rude when it is deliberately directed resulting in dehumanizing communication. The paper, therefore, examines dehumanizing communication in terms of its being intentional and unintentional and dehumanizing communication between lecturers and students and among students. It also took a swipe on the effects of dehumanizing communication on students and lecturers as well as proffer solutions to mitigating effect of dehumanizing communication between lecturer and students and among students. The suggested solutions among others include inter-group dialogue programme among contending groups in the student community, establishment of multicultural centers on campus in order to bring contending groups together (i.e. lecturers and students of all races and ethnicity). A compulsory course on “pedagogy of positiveness” is also recommended in the university curriculum to instill in the students the value of respecting people who may be different.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Intentional and Unintentional Communication, Reified, Lecturers, Undergraduates, Teaching and Learning, Classroom

1. Introduction

Communication is essential to human interaction and learning. It is a basic human right and important to our quality of life as social species. As human beings we use communication to relate to others, socially connect, greet, call attention, share feelings, express opinions, agree and disagree, provide feedback, make friends, show interest and disinterest and so on. The nature of communication is dependent on interaction between two or more individuals and understanding is constructed through the interaction. Communication generally involves a sender and a receiver or receivers conveying information through a communication channel. The desired outcome of any communication is to ensure understanding. The communicator must encode the message or the information being conveyed into a form that is appropriate to the communication channel and the receiver(s) then decode(s) the message to understand its meaning and significance. Communication could be verbal through face to face, or telephone interaction. It could also be non-verbal (body language and gestures). In the face to face communication, both parties can communicate even in subtle ways, such as eye contact and general body language. However, whenever something constraints the effectiveness of our spoken language augmentative form is resorted to. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) are said to be influenced by individuals abilities, environment, persons we are communicating with and acceptable social mores, (Worah, Douglas, McNaughton & Kennedy, 2010). For someone who has laryngitis, you can use paper and pen to communicate, likewise one cannot physically contact with, and you may use text messages or e-mail. For those who do not speak the same language with the communicator, gesture, and facial expression can be used to communicate.

Communication can be intentional and unintentional. This is seen in the process of passing on messages. Misunderstanding can occur at any stage of the communication process which may lead to dehumanization. Dehumanization is the act of degrading people with respect to their best qualities (WordNet @ 3.0, 2006). It is also described as a psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and thus deserving moral consideration (Maiese, 2003).

Dehumanization is theorized to take on two forms, animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006). Animalistic dehumanization occurs when uniquely human characteristics such as refinement and sensibility are denied to an out group (Haslam 2006). People who suffer animalistic dehumanization are seen as immoral, unintelligent lacking of self-control and are likened to animal. It is employed largely on inter-group basis, such as ethnic, racial and other various student groups. This has happened to Black Americans in America, Jews in Europe and Tutsis in Rwanda (Haslam, 2006).

Haslam (2006) also noted that Mechanistic dehumanization occurs when the feature of human nature such as cognitive flexibility, warmth and agency are denied the target. Targets of mechanistic dehumanization are seen as cold, rigid, interchangeable and lacking agency and are likened to machines. It is employed largely on inter-personal basis as lecturers and students or students and students.

Dehumanization can occur discursively as idiomatic language, that likens certain human beings to non-human, verbal abuse, imagery, physically, such as refusing eye contact among others (WordNet @ 3.0, 2006). All these contribute to dehumanizing communication. When this happens in a teaching and learning environment like the university where communication plays a key role in promoting students' academic and social development, the essence of communication is defeated. In the lecture hall or classroom dehumanizing communication do occur between lecturers and students, students and students. Outside the classroom it can also occur among the students for various reasons.

Dehumanizing communication is a critical issue for educators and parents to address because a student does not feel protected in a classroom or outside the classroom particularly now that the average age of undergraduates is greatly lowered. The students may not be able to concentrate on learning and may be pre-occupied with anxiety and the urge to be ready to fight back, tries to run away when falls a victim and becomes overwhelmed.

The communiqué of the Fourth Global Conference 2012 (Fourth global Conference, 2012) in Salzburg, Australia, a bullied student experiences deep psychological pain, change of action and responses. Also a teacher who experiences dehumanizing communication would not find it easy because he may certainly feel some psychological pain too. He may be apprehensive to face the class or forced to be short-tempered thereby feeling uncomfortable with the students. Reification means giving an abstraction to its own identity (Gents, 2003). Dehumanizing communication is an abstraction in itself, but when it occurs it gives itself some identity and becomes real. It then subsequently becomes a key factor in group dynamics. On this backdrop, the paper focuses on the following:

Intentional dehumanizing communication, Unintentional dehumanizing communication, Communication in teaching and learning in the University environment , Dehumanizing communication between lecturer and students, and Dehumanizing communication among students.

1. The effect of dehumanizing communication on students.
2. The effect of dehumanizing communication on Lecturers.
3. Suggested solutions for dehumanizing communication between lecturers and students and among students.

2. Intentional Dehumanizing Communication

International dehumanizing communication is said to occur when the communicator deliberately sends out a degrading message with a specific objective in mind and with the belief that it would be decoded correctly to achieve the desired outcome. The communicator's objective in sending the message is to dehumanize the receiver. For instance, the teacher recalled the way the head of the department used whatever means at her disposal to put the students down such that, meeting her was usually described as a sickening experience (Temasektimes, 2012). She would sing the praises of the whole school system and put all failed candidates down even when everyone knew there was a serious institutional problem. This, according to the trainee teacher, was a significant reason why many student teachers particularly those who broke the bond chose to suicide. The Head of the department in this case has the intention to make the students feel inadequate and totally frustrated and her dehumanizing communication succeeded in doing just that. In intentional dehumanizing communication, the communicator is consciously determined to humiliate the receiver.

Another significant intentional dehumanizing communication was investigated by Jihad, Nan, Tyrone and Arman (2012) on Moslem and Arab student Campus climate at the University of California, in the United States. The investigation reported that student participants at the investigation recounted several incidents of faculty making insensitive, inappropriate and offensive comments about the Moslem faith or stereotyping Arabs as "terrorists" in the classroom. Students, according to them, highlighted bias or perceived harassment as primarily directed from other students, particularly the campus newspaper.

As stated earlier, the aim of intentional dehumanizing communication is to consciously hurt the receiver(s). Haslam in Costigan (2009) noted that dehumanization is widespread and not just used against a particular group. Consequently, intentional dehumanization communication abounds in various university campuses all over the world, among students of different races and ethnic groups. It also occurs when some students feel they are academically superior to others. In Nigeria words like "Olodo", "Ode" meaning dullards are casually used to described some students who are academically below average as jokes. Hairston (2008) rightly explains that cognitive capacity among others is often a criterion for exclusion. There is also intentional dehumanizing communication between lecturers and students when the lecturer is not getting what he wants from the students and becomes frustrated, he may lash out at them calling them names in a subtle manner. Sometimes the lecturer may pass humiliating comments on the students' backgrounds. Students, on the other hand, may resort to calling the lecturer by a nick name or making rude noises. Characteristics of intentional communication include eye contact while gesturing and vocalizing, alternative gaze between object and

partner, consistent gestures and ritualizing of gestures, using the same gesture and vocalization combination for one particular object, event or situation.

3. Unintentional Dehumanizing Communication

Unintentional dehumanizing communication refers to a dehumanizing communication either directed to the wrong person or a communication misinterpreted or wrongly decoded by the receiver from his or her own Perception. This can happen when a student in attempt to share a joke with his friend through a text message passes it on to the wrong person who may not take kindly to such jokes, particularly if the two are not familiar with each other. The receiver may feel the communication is dehumanizing. On the other hand, a harmless communication could be passed to a lecturer by a student but because of the manner in which it was coded, the receiver in interpreting the message may read another meaning into it and term the message dehumanizing. Sometimes, the receiver may be unable to decode the message and get embarrassed by the strange information which could be termed unintentional dehumanizing communication. Since this message was not originally intended for the receiver it is termed unintentional because of individual difference in the perceptions of communication decoding. Most unintentional dehumanizing communication is usually non-verbal because it is easier to pass on a dehumanizing communication without uttering a word and without people noticing.

Unintentional dehumanizing communication if not addressed can create a serious misunderstanding between the communicator and the receiver. It may leave a deep scar in the life of the receiver even after being addressed, while the communicator will continue to battle with a sense of guilt for a long time depending on the contents. Unintentional dehumanizing communication also damages valuable relationships between the Lecturer and the students, as well as among students.

4. Communication in Teaching and Learning Process

The process of communication in the classroom requires a vast repertoire of skills in intrapersonal and interpersonal processing such as listening, observing, speaking, questioning, analyzing and evaluation. Communication in teaching and learning environment such as the university is very vital. It is required in the delivery of lectures, carrying out of assignments and socialization. Each communication channel has different strengths and weaknesses. An effective communicator in the university system is expected to understand his or her audience by choosing an appropriate communication channel to reduce misunderstanding by the receiver(s).

For effective communication to take place, the lecturer should ensure the class is quiet and well lit. They should speak slowly and clearly by using only the words which the students should be able to understand. They should have means of getting regular feedback from the receiver(s) (students) to ascertain they do follow.

Since communication does not only take place by means of words, non-verbal communication or body language should be considered important. While the lecturer reads the students' body language, they too should read the lecturer's for effective and smooth communication to avoid misinterpretation. Written communication is also important in the classroom interaction. Comments on students' performances on a given assignment should be polite and humane. It should encourage and not discourage the student to avoid dehumanizing communication. Reprimand should be constructive to enable the learner build his or her confidence. It is through communication that collaboration and cooperation can occur between teacher and students as well as among students. Through collaboration and cooperation, dehumanizing communication would be minimized.

5. Dehumanizing Communication between Lecturer and Students

Haslam (2006) noted that dehumanization makes frequent appearances in academic domains. He observed that educational theorists decry the dehumanizing implications of standardized assessment and teaching which are rigid and impersonal. According to Mbaize(2003) and Costigan (2009), such teaching and learning processes treat students as passive and uncreative. This method of instruction and assessment can be considered dehumanizing communication on the part of the students. In either case their needs and humanness are denied. Khan (2012) also asserted that classroom lectures can be long, boring and ineffective, thus reducing the attention span of students. This method, therefore, puts the students under communicative pressure that dehumanizes them. Consequently, alternative methods which promote students active participation and problem solving technique is advocated by this paper at all levels of education especially at the university level. The use of new technology in the class by the lecturer without proper and adequate orientation on the part of the students can also give rise to dehumanizing communication (Sadoval, 2008). There is, therefore, the need for proper orientation on any new technology before its use by the students in teaching and learning process.

Verbal and non-verbal dehumanizing communication can occur between lecturer and students as a result of cultural differences and misinterpretation of communication. For instance, a lecturer from the Western world would regard a student avoiding eye contact with him while addressing him or her as rude whereas an African lecturer will regard it as a mark of respect. Also African students regard calling their lecturers by name in their faces as rudeness while it is acceptable in the West. It is also an abomination for an African student to address his or her lecturer by his or her first name no matter the situation whereas it is acceptable in the Western World. There is also dehumanizing communication between lecturer and student in the use of technology. According to Sandoval (2008), mass media technology can lead to dangers of dehumanization as it is possible for communicators, such as teachers to treat the consumers such as students as machines. The lecturers may fail to perceive the receiver of their messages (students) as humans with right, privileges and motivation of their own. Whatever is going on inside the students during the process of teaching and learning in the classroom should be given a thought by the teacher. Their emotions should not be turned on and off with

technology by the lecturer. Active participation by students in the classroom is part of humane interaction. Dehumanizing communication between lecturer and students can also occur in various ways

Sometimes students do not prepare themselves ahead of the next-class thus making teaching and learning difficult by their unpreparedness. In such a situation, the lecturer is pushed to use harsh words on them such as “you are irresponsible and unserious”, which could be dehumanizing. Where students continuously cannot make meaningful contribution in class, the lecturer can be mad at them. A lecturer who is strict and insists on the right things being done is usually given nick names and made caricature of by the students. This they can do verbally or by displaying offensive body language when talking to the lecturer to the amusement of their course-mates. This repulsive body language (dehumanizing communication) could be by their facial expressions or gesticulations.

Sometimes dehumanization communication arises when the lecturer in the process of solving some complicated problems on the writing-board run into trouble and some students mischievously begin to proffer unreasonable solutions with the intent of confusing the lecturer more to the amusement of their course-mates. All these and many more are dehumanizing communication that can take place between lecturers and students in the classroom. A positive communication between lecturers and students is very important in order to encourage effective teaching and learning in the classroom. This creates cordial relationship between the two and will make the lecturer easily approachable. This will put the students at ease to discuss their difficulties in the teaching and learning process.

6. Dehumanizing Communication among Students

Dehumanizing communication can occur among students in and outside the classroom. As Haslam in Costigan (2009) observed it, when a situation becomes inflamed and tension rises, you will often find people often referring to others using dehumanizing language. In the classroom dehumanizing communication arises from the struggle to have access to facilities that are in short supply. In a situation like this students go as low as passing racial or ethnic comments on each other. Sometimes when a student’s performance is outstanding, those who do not measure up to such a student may try to run the fellow down by passing dehumanizing comments each time the fellow is commended. Hairston (2008) asserted that those who choose to dehumanize others tend to perceive them as a threat to their well-being.

Dehumanizing communication can occur between male and female students. In most cases the females are the victims. American College of Health Association (ACHA) in its 2011 National College Health Assessment, cited by North Western University charge to her students on sexual violence, stated that, eleven (11%) percent of female students and seven percent (7%) of male students are reported of being in emotional abusive relationships (Western University 2012). Some male students sometimes use language that degrade, intimidate and dehumanize female students. The language of some male students when addressing female colleagues is prejudicial and hostile.

In Nigerian universities freshmen are nicknamed “Jambites” an acronym coined from the qualifying examination for admission, conducted by the Joint Admissions Matriculation Board (JAMB). The acronym is intended to portray the freshmen as “Johnny just come” who are yet to taste campus life. Freshmen find it repulsive and dehumanizing. Dehumanizing communication can also occur among students outside the classroom, such as in the sports arena or in campus politics. As noted by Costigan (2009), the language of dehumanization occurs with regular insults such as comparing players with animals. In multiracial universities it is common for black players to hear monkey sound directed at them by their white colleagues in the sports field. Sometimes they throw bananas into the sports arena to humiliate them through non-verbal communication.

According to Haslam in Costigan (2009), dehumanizing a group diminishes people’s empathy for them. For instance, if certain students are dehumanized by others through communication there is the tendency that such students would not elicit soft feelings from the rest of the students. This is easily observable when those who should come to their rescue join the small student group to taunt them or look away while it lasted. It is unfortunate that when a group is dehumanized, people feel less concerned for them and do not seem to bother when they are treated harshly. In some institutions, the campus newspapers have been used to persecute the victims. In the case of the Muslim Arab students in the University of California strong words such as “extremists” “terrorists” and “fanatics” have been used to describe them (El-Farra 1996). Turk *et al.*, (2012), noted that political disagreement elicited anti-Muslim bigoted comments and identify bashing from other students. Muslim female students who observed Hijab and wore religious head scarves encountered frequent bigot comments. Shaheen in El-Farra (1996) also noted that the Arab stereotype parallels the image of Jews in pre-Nazi Germany, where Jews were painted as dark, shifty-eyed, venal and threateningly different people”.

At the university of Ibadan Nigeria, students of Igbo ethnic origin are always harassed by other students by calling them ‘Okoro’. Although “Okoro” is a name borne by members of this ethnic group the idea behind it is to present them as primitive. When these people could not bear it any longer they started retaliating by calling the main culprits the Yorubas “ouse”, for house, “all” for hall. Because they find it difficult to pronounce ‘H’ when it begins a word.

In Nigerian universities bigot comments are common among the undergraduates when making references to somebody of another ethnic group even when they know such persons very well by name. References such as “Ikwere man”, “Okirika man” “Calabar girl” and so on are common. Students also refer to each other using an adulteration of a word in the students’ ethnic language such as, “Mong” (meaning water) to describe Efik/Ibibio students, “Uneghe” (banana) or “Nyamiri” (give me some water) for Igbo Students, or geographic location, “Mba Miri” (people of water) for Riverine students. “Ofe manu” for Yoruba people because their local soups are oily. All these names are found very

offensive by each group. Also some students from rich homes address their poor colleagues in a sarcastic manner irrespective of how they feel. They carry with them some air of superiority and talk down on others.

7. Effect of Dehumanizing Communication on Students

Dehumanizing communication significantly influences students' perception and feelings on campus. Its effect is deep and long lasting. The Muslim and Arab students of California State University are reported to operate within a climate of suspicion and mistrust on campus. Such students feel selectively scrutinized and harassed particularly in the functioning of student organization activities. In many campuses in general there is usually some kind of segregation during student's union activities which does not augur well for the development of the union and youths in general who would be future leaders.

In the classroom the student victim may be greatly discouraged and feel that he or she is worthless. Such students may do everything possible to avoid attending lecturers and may eventually drop out in extreme cases. According to Maise (2003), the psychology of dehumanization in the course of protracted conflicts is feelings of anger, fear and distrust. He further reiterated that dehumanization is an extension of less intense process of developing an "enemy image" of the opponent. This gives rise to adversarial attitude and perceptions between both parties who then begin to attribute negative traits to their opponents. It generally leads to suppression of talents, poor learning, and poor academic performance.

8. Effect of Dehumanizing Communication on the Lecturer

Affective disposition theory in the entertainment Industry states in simple form that entertainment media users make moral judgment about in a narrative which is said to affect the enjoyment of the narrative (Zillmann & Cantor 1972). Applying this to teaching and learning process, both lecturer and students view each other as actors in the academic arena. Each attaches emotion to the activities of the other. Where a student appreciates a lecturer, such a student would always like to participate in the teaching and learning conducted by the lecturer. This also applies to the lecturer where his or her students satisfy him or her, such a lecturer would never want to miss a class with them. This brings about a kind of bond between the students and the lecturer. If there is, therefore, dehumanizing communication between students and lecturers, the emotional responses of the lecturer towards the students will be poor. Disposition based theories contend that affiliating towards characters are formed and maintained on a continuum, from extreme positive through indifference to extreme negative effect. The lecturer may emotionally split his students through these lines. With more dehumanizing communication coming from his students, the balance may likely tilt towards indifference and extreme negativity which will not augur well in teaching and learning process. This would strain or destroy the lecturer/student relationship. Dehumanizing communication will prevent proper conveyance of information to the lecturer from the students and from the lecturer to the students. It would also damage communication from the lecturer to the students as the lecturer may decide to be economical with information. In such a situation he or she might compel them to read up the rest of the information as a substitute to their lecture. Dehumanizing communication between lecturer and students will not promote trust on the part of the lecturer. They would always be suspicious that the students are up to something once again.

9. Conclusion

This paper has made effort to show-case that dehumanizing communication occurs in the university campuses, between lecturers and students and among students. This type of communication occurs between two opposing groups, in a multiracial, multi-religious or multi ethnic students community, between academically endowed and less endowed, rich and poor students, vastly exposed and unexposed students, male and female students and so on. It has also been shown that it hurts deeply and leaves a lasting scar. This paper has also shown its effect on all concerned. Some suggestions-based on the nature and effect of dehumanizing communication could be given as shown below.

10. Suggested Solutions

Dehumanizing communication in a teaching and learning environment is a serious cankerworm that needs to be eliminated or at least minimized. One of the reasons it continues unabated is that most of the cases are not reported and for those reported little or nothing is done about them. Suggestions therefore include:

1. Curbing dehumanizing communication on university campuses.
2. Ensuring that every single incident of dehumanizing communication is reported to the appropriate authorities at the right time for arbitration.
3. Every reported case should be addressed to its logical conclusion and progress reports should be made available to campus community for perusal as well as evidence that something is being done.
4. Report of each treated case should be properly documented for reference purposes on demand. The open knowledge of what transpired in each case will act as a deterrent to others.
5. Those found guilty should be appropriately punished as a deterrent to others.
6. There should be intergroup dialogue programmes particularly among contending groups in the students community. Such programmes should be inter-racial; inter-ethnic, inter-religious, teachers-students, bright and not so bright students, rich and poor students in order to encourage interaction and better understanding between the various groups.
7. Multicultural centers should be established and encouraged on campus in order to bring contending groups together such as lecturers and students of all races, religion and ethnicity. Such centers include religion and cultural ones. This will foster better understanding as they get to know one another more closely.

8. There should be a proactive inclusion of the target population of student community or individuals in campus climate efforts. The management of the institution should proactively reach out to the student leadership.
9. A compulsory course on “pedagogy of positiveness” should be introduced in the University curriculum as a general study course in order to instill in the students the value of respecting people who may be different from them for the sake of world peace. This course is developed for diplomatic communication (Gomes Des Matos, 2001).
10. Students should avoid unintentional communication that hampers organizational success by learning and adhering to 10 principles of listening skills viz:
 - Listen attentively when somebody else is talking
 - Prepare oneself to listen
 - Put the speaker at ease
 - Remove distracters
 - Empathize
 - Be patient with the sender
 - Avoid personal prejudice
 - Listen to the tone
 - Listen for ideas not just words
 - Wait and watch for non-verbal communication
11. The Lecturer must give students proper and adequate orientation on any new communication technology that is to be used in the instructional process to minimize dehumanizing communication.
12. Active participation of students should be encouraged in and outside the classroom to take care of their rights, privileges and motivation in order to achieve humane interaction.

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