Communication Efficiency within Higher Education Institutions: The Case of Romania

By

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Abstract:

The concept of communication is very hard to define, its complexity spawning controversy and interpretation. Only by taking a very close look at the phenomenon may we be able to unravel its real meanings. Thus, this paper wishes to address the aforementioned goal through: analysis of current situation of communication within higher education (case of Romania), and identification of possible ways to increase communication efficiency. Yet another necessity this paper is aimed at is the need of change within education. This change is imposed upon by the process of lining up the Romanian higher education system with the one of the European Union. This process started in 1999 along with the signing of the Bologna declaration.

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1.   Context

Education is a dynamic and complex process. Frequently, education is assimilated to an economic good which submits the exchange, identifying an educational market. In this context, the subjects of the educational life are active elements which interact and contribute through its actions to the change in education. That is why the approach of the communication efficiency concept contributes to the processes orientation in higher education toward quality and efficiency.

The concern for efficient communication in education field is the necessity for all education contractors as the result of educational system evolution regarding new trends imposed by national and international strategies and as the

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result of competition relations, respectively of the management interest regarding the growth of educational processes efficiency. The communication means symbols, messages, interaction, processes and transfers, stimulations, questions and answers, intentions, power and control.

An integrated communication process, needful in high education institutions, must be defined as the complete shape, including a proper communication channel, a good speech, an understandable message, evaluation of the feedback by creating educational programs adjustable to the student needs.

In that sense, to create the background for positive communication mechanism development in higher education, communication should excel the impediment of strategy implementation in national or European education and to transform the barriers into the purpose.

Therefore, the paper is developed by analyzing the actual status of the communication in the higher education (case of Romania) regarding possible ways of identification of the communication efficiency growing.

2.   Concept of Communication and Education

The act of communicating represents a process of transmitting information, ideas and feelings (attitudes, opinions) from one individual to another, from one individual to a social group and vice versa. Communication is the process by which the exchange of meaning between people takes place. To Robert Escarpit, "communicating does not only mean sending and receiving, but participating, on all levels, to an infinite of various exchanges that overlap and interfere with one another" (Escarpit, 1980).

As such, this should be the premise of communication within the field of education in general, and higher education in particular. It should rely on investing in a process of communication based on two-way teacher-student information, in other words: steering away from the classic form of the student listening, toward the general idea of the student's active participation within the course. Idea sharing is a key element here. All of the above transform the communicational act, from a mere process to the factor that may lead to radical changes regarding the quality of higher education.

One understands communication as the process of transmitting meaningful messages between people, as a concept that encompasses all those processes by which people influence each other. The act of communication takes place when a *source* transmits signals via a channel, to the receiver; when the sender sends out a piece of information, an idea or an attitude (silence itself may represent an attitude / piece of information).

One may speak about two meanings of communication: a limited one, whereby we understand the process of information transmission through messages (a human-specific process that has led to language development), and a wide or loose meaning of contact and collaboration, employing sounds, gestures (also manifested in the animal kingdom).

Human language is expressed in mutual communication. There are various ways and means of communication depending on the relationship between

speaker and hearer, distance (space-time) between the two, and the means of their communication.

People understand each other through gestures and words (direct communication), and writing and other modern means (mass-media) in the case of indirect communication**.**

Communication is all about the transmission of meaning with the help of signs. Mandatory condition thereof is that the signs by which a message is transmitted must have the same meaning for both sender and recipient (in other words, they must speak the same language).

2.1 The concept of Efficiency

Efficiency is a complex concept having especially economic interpretation and signification. This concept expresses a rational demanding from the perspective of choice of objectives and reasons in order to maximize the effects of human action in the spending content of an effort, or in opposite to minimize the efforts in the context of registering specific effects.

Certainly, people's choice takes place in the real time economy, having the basic contradiction between requirements and resources in its contextual background. In case needs are interpreted as being effects and resources as being efforts, being efficient means:

- to satisfy bigger needs using the same resources;
- to satisfy bigger needs using less resources;
- to satisfy the same needs using less resources.

Any process in modern economy presumes choices, decisions and costs of opportunities. An efficient process expresses efficient choices and lower opportunities costs.

Therefore, educational process may be and need to be interpreted in sense of efficient decisions, as well as in the case of communication process. Consequently, the concept of communication efficiency in institutions of higher education may be defined as maximized capacity of communication effects in terms of efforts or contrary – minimization of efforts in the context of communication process efforts.

2.2 The Concept of Education

The concept of education is professionally defined as "a multitude of social actions aimed at transmitting culture, generating, organizing and conducting individual and/or collective teaching". According to the degree of organizing the entire process, one may distinguish between formal, non-formal, and informal education.

> *a) Formal education* is done by acts of teaching designed by specialized personnel on the basis of preset goals within hierarchically structured scholar institutions, according to age and performance criteria.

b)   *Informal education* is the permanent process of voluntarily and involuntarily assimilation of attitudes, values, behavior patterns and knowledge that circulates among relationships and social interactions within personal life, family life, at work during play, in the library, on the street etc. The expansion area of informal education depends on individual receptivity and social pressure, including socialization, propaganda and other educational social actions that also help in shaping up the conscience.

c)   *Non-formal education* takes place through educational actions, instructing and learning networks outside of the educational system as a response to social demands and individual needs of continuous learning. Non-formal education has evolved rapidly from the second half of the last century and it is now expanding and includes educational institutions dedicated mostly to the young and adults (open or popular universities, community colleges, culture or creation houses etc.). These are sometimes complementary to scholar institutions that they are sometimes modeled after, and are often more flexible in time planning, being mostly aimed at rather immediate goals of informing or even qualification acquiring.

The boundaries between institutions and social actions (particular to the aforementioned education types) are not that strict. Together they close the circle of the educational system of a national society.

One needs a radical change in view however, regarding the role of education and investment therein: switching from a predominantly informative role to the formative one, from the prevalence of instruction to that of education**.** One requires a transition from traditional education to a modern type of education, a dynamic, formative one, which addresses the needs of today. Education is no longer bound to mere accumulation of information. Since we nowadays live in a new, modern world education must now be interdisciplinary, it must now be open to new fields like: educational communication.

From the point of view of organizing higher education, one should point out it is a pyramidal structure, with a system of internal and external communication based on institutional hierarchy. As such, the structure of a higher education institution looks as follows: on the uppermost level we find the Rector of the University, followed by the deputy rectors (each one having a specific field to look after: Schooling, administrative matters and human resources, social matters, external relations etc.). These fields constitute the central apparatus of a university. Right underneath the rector's office, we have the faculties represented by: the Dean, Deputy Dean, head master, science secretary and year tutor. At student level we have: students in charge at faculty level and rector's office level.

Within the communication process which is based on institutional hierarchy we encounter the following communication types:

- Written: addresses, notices, methodology regulations sent by the rector's office to the faculty and vice versa. At student level the standard procedure is the petition.

- Oral: periodic meetings within sessions of the University Senate with the Deans of the faculties as well as official meetings for specific problems. At a faculty level verbal communication is achieved by meetings of the Council of the faculty, chair meetings as well as audiences with the Dean and/or Deputy Dean.

3. Communication and Education

3.1 The Role of Communication within Education

Communication is a key factor of education, a fundamental component of life progress culture and civilization; it entails a complex relationship between a sender and the recipient, a dynamic mechanism of mediation, with deep implication in human modeling.

The relationship between mediation and communication makes way for the following interpretation: communication is a means of expressing personal ideas and social relationships and through its very goal, an instrument of social change.

A key role in receiving and deciphering a message is played by one's personal life experience. It differs from one individual to another and it may amplify as well as diminish the ability to receive and decode that message.

Feedback is useful for both the sender and the recipient; it is a sui generis way of behaving in communication. Context is also very important in the process of communication. The context of communication is made up by the three environments: family, school, society. These environments must have a close relationship with one another.

Nowadays communication within education has a dual role: on the one hand it is the instrument by which the educational act is deployed: teaching – learning, and on the other hand it is the very factor subject to change since it's an important element that helps change the educational system in general and higher education in particular.

3.2 The Communication System within Romania's Higher Education

A. Ways of communicating:

At the internal level of the communication process we find three ways of communicating:

    a) Vertical communication

Vertical communication is specific for educational institutions. Vertical communication is a sure fire way of controlling the actions of the employees and protecting the institution from certain negative reactions of the public regarding one issue or another. In particular within higher education institutions, the information is transmitted from the first level – the students, who send out the message to the top management. In order for student petitions to reach the dean of the faculty, the message is analyzed by the head monster together with the deputy

dean. If problems cannot be solved at this level the request is analyzed by the Dean himself.

Didactically speaking, the professor – student, student—professor communication is done verbally (teaching, oral evaluations within seminars) and in writing (coursework, bibliography, tests and exams).

b) Horizontal communication

Horizontal communication is one way of message propagation on the same level. Horizontal communication is basically a way of opinion shaping, identification of common needs and interests, as well as a way of presenting these to the upper management. In this context either students or professors will try to identify a common denominator in order to present a view characteristic of the general will. Before using vertical communication the horizontal one will be the base instrument towards opinion generation.

Didactically this type of communication is optimal for courses that require exchange of ideas, conclusion drawing between professor and student within topics that require debates, etc.

c) Mixed communication

Mixed communication is the ideal form of communication within higher education institutions. The principle is based upon is both a horizontal and a vertical openness. Also such a communication allows for a diagonal exchange of ideas. This means that students' messages can be received by upper management in a far easier way thanks to the openness to dialogue. Message transmission will no longer be solely verbal, but through specially created systems in agreement with the students, professors and upper management.

Didactically, this type of communication is to be found in "Open Universities", in which the teaching process is based on dialogue, students' formative character, where learning is closely supervised by the professor.

At an external communication level, the system of organizing the state' higher education sets itself apart from the private one from the point of view of communication with its public as well as public perception. Therefore:

• Private education envisages acquiring income and therefore system of communicating with the public is more visible than in state institutions. They invest large amounts of money into publicity on the specific market. Their communication activities are similar to those of private companies: the accent falls on the message and clear target public segmentation, by using marketing-like methods of promoting:

-   Radio and TV commercial clips
-   Using presentation printouts in written publications
-   Handing out flyers among the target public
-   Using discounts upon subscription and all along the study years etc.

Apparently they understood that in order for private universities to stay in business, 1 need to invest in a communications strategy which is adaptable to every public category and address the various needs of the various students. Private educations weakness is to be found at public perception: potential candidates, employers, Romanian society – most of these do not hold private

education in high esteem considering it to be sloppier and generating ill-prepared graduates.

• Public education is in high esteem when it comes to public perception, as it does seem as rigorous, based on acquiring ample concepts that help graduates obtained a matching degree for the demands of the job market. The weak point is to be identified at the level of communication within certain majors where we may encounter a strictly informative teaching system rather than a formative one. This may sometimes leads to a lack of motivation among students, a system which the employers find unsuited from the point of view of practical ability development in graduates. As such the lack of efficiency in communication within higher education institutions may very well lead to a decrease in quality of the educational act and, over time, to reputation damage. Also at the external level of communication a key role should be played by communicating with social and economic partners, targeting partnerships and mutual satisfaction of both employer and potential student.

B. Obstacles in the way of communication:

Certain obstacles may interfere with these ways of communicating. These may be:

a) Physical obstacles (distance, space);
b) Social obstacles (different conceptions of life);
c) Knowledge obstacles (insufficient experience, retardation, etc.);
d) Socio-psychological obstacles (habits, traditions, biases)
e) State/politics obstacles;
f) Economic obstacles;
g) Technical obstacles;
h) Linguistic obstacles (Bârliba, 1987).

There various factors that may constitute communication obstacles. Differences in perception are just the root of other communication barriers. "The way we look at the world is influenced by our prior experience, so that people of different ages, nationalities, cultures, educations, gender, temperament etc. would have different perceptions and will interpret situations differently", according to Nicki Stanton (Stanton, 1995).

Other communication barriers, this time specific to the educational act, are as follows:

1) Distortion – is to be found when the message has suffered an alteration along the way, (differences in repertoire, ambiguity, erroneous interpretation on the recipient side, necessity of compressing the information, social distance or status gaps between sender and recipient). In school these barriers are often encountered; thus the lack of a common repertoire between professor and student often leads to communication distortion

2) Omission – occurs when the sender deliberately filters the message board is somehow incapable of comprising the entire message. For instance this is the case of the professor who filters the message sent to

students when he tries to deliver a large quantity of information in a relatively short amount of time.

3) Overload – refers to the situation when the recipient must cope with an extreme amount of information; this may lead to a rejection of course specific activities, misleading the students and physical and motivational exhaustion on their side.

4) Synchronization – entails the identification of the right time for each stage of the activity we wish to fulfill.

All of these barriers must be overcome through an education of communication, thus rendering it efficient. This implies instituting a new didactics of communication within higher education, which means:

- Favoring self-knowledge through communication resources;
- Making oneself familiar with all forms of the communication process;
- Discovering personal availabilities in abeyance;
- Activating communication aptitudes;
- Discovery of the other ones' communicational resources;
- Optimally using multiple send/receive didactic channels;
- Valorization of integral communication etc. (Soitu, 1996)

One must also replace scholastic grammar (mechanically learned), with a grammar of communication, in which the accent falls on the context, on the role of non-verbal elements, on complexly organizing communication (Slama-Cazacu, 1999). In this regard another requirement arises: preparation of the next generation of "educators" as well as perfecting the current ones within a specific framework such as an educational communication laboratory.

3.3. Modeling the Educator toward Communication

Anglo-Saxon (Open University) and French experience has shown the necessity that the educator be prepared towards change. He has to show competence in all levels both in knowledge and in methods. The very system of education must make this switch. By that we don't only understand the idea of automating (modern means, ways of communication) , but identifying those solutions that would enable the experts to develop new abilities according to the needs of the day.

These requirements entail:

a) Having a technical culture. Be knowledgeable in new information and communication techniques (based on IT and robotics), positively influence the behavior of both student and educator.

b) Knowing how to communicate. It's not enough for an educator to have a certain knowledge pool. He needs to have social cultural and educational preparation: an ability to communicate his prior experience, a certain personal and situational relationship with the recipient, psychological treats to enable him an efficient communication. Restraining oneself to the own discipline determines an individualist vision, a conservative one. That's why an

interdisciplinary vision and a change of policy are required. This implies however the availability of the educator to encounter and recognize different ways of thinking and disciplines (this is also true of the recipient, who must be motivated toward receiving the message).

c) Employing well outlined methods. Coordination of interdisciplinary actions requires mastering complex communicational strategies and techniques, which must be known and embraced by all factors involved in the educational process.

d) Knowing how to archive. The professor may become a researcher, a creator in his field. He can capitalize his and his collaborators' knowledge (involved in the process of research), by publishing studies articles etc.

e) Knowing how to market one. In this respect the educator must publicize his messages via mass media, in order to share his competence with a larger audience. (Soitu,1996)

3.4. S.W.O.T. Analysis

Toward a better understanding of the communication system within higher education in Romania and in order to easily identify ways to increase the efficiency and communication a S.W.O.T. analysis presents itself as follows:

Strengths	- Existence of common interests when it comes to communicating within higher education institutions - Existence of communication and public relations departments, whose role is to communicate internally and externally - The reputation that higher education enjoys - Openness of the universities toward improvement in didactic activity, the emergence of preoccupation towards creating well suited curricula, both for the student and for the job market.
Weaknesses	- No dialogue with social partners - Dysfunctions in sending and receiving information and slowness in identification of priorities and dissemination of decisions in all functional levels

	- Lack of motivation for a large number of students, also caused by insufficient professor – student dialogue - Weak involvement of higher education institutions in promoting their own services - Maintaining (for some majors) traditional teaching methods, unsuited for the needs of students - Lack of a continuous flow of information in all levels of the institution
Opportunities	- Elaborating a strategy of communication with the target public - Investing in an efficient plan of internal communication at the level of the Rector's office - Elaborating an internal training (organized by the rector's office) for all employees of the University. The goal is to create the premises for efficient communication on all levels and gaining feedback necessary in elaborating the next strategy of internal communication and on a long term to increase the human resources efficiency - Increasing the degree of readiness on the side of the Professor towards methods of efficiently communicating with the students - Investing in informative programs designed to help universities continuously and coherently communicate with their public - Increasing the degree of information among students by using specific channels of information : the Internet, usage of informal leaders among students - Increasing the role of the students' representatives in the faculty Council and University Senate - Increasing the role of the tutor by organizing periodical assemblies with the students he/she represents in order to find quick solutions to their problems

Threats	- Lack of will to render the communication efficient identified in more conservative educators - Insufficient coordination of communication activities at top management levels - Lack of efficient electronic means of communication between faculties and the Rector's office, and between students and professors - Lack of efficient communicational models that could act as a model for those wishing to improve their communication

Fig. 1 S.W.O.T. Analysis

On the basis of the current situation deducted from the SWOT analysis, we may state that an efficient communication system within higher education is an absolute need when taking into account the following factors:

1) Economical factors: a better absorption of graduates on the Job market, an increase in the number of students, gaining strategic advantage in the competition against external universities by: increasing the quality of the didactic act, efficiently organizing the entire higher education system (information circulation); increase in degree of knowledge on the educators' side by widening the knowledge universe, by investing knowledge within research and specialty publications.

2) Social factors: increase the degree of motivation and satisfaction of the student, keeping and maintaining the fame of the University, adapting the didactic act to social transformations.

3) Cultural factors: transmission of positive values, given the known role that education has: promoter of cultural and social change.

4. Conclusion - Ways to Increase Efficiency of Communication in Higher Education Institutions

Towards effectively achieving communication for education and education through communication some suggestions may be helpful as they can be indicative:

- Change of mentality regarding educational process from objectives and contents to organizing and evaluation;
- Switching from the dominantly instructive to proper education, from informative to formative;
- Necessity of a real reform in education, in all levels;
- Interdisciplinary approach of instruction and education;
- Introduction of new disciplines based on the idea of communication and education along with classic disciplines;
- Preparing new evaluation methods according to the requirements of the modern man;
- Continuously using modern technical means in the instructive / educational process;

- Re-evaluation of University's role within the new social and historic context (for EU's new member states), and in this framework official, theoretic recognition, as well as practical support given to Romania's higher educational, be it state or private, taking into account that the University is a trigger for change and stands at the origin of evolution in culture and society.

To conclude, the concept of communication within the educational field is not new, as day goes by however this process is enjoying new approaches as to the role of communication in the execution of the teaching act. Therefore the necessity of communication efficiency within education (and especially higher education), represents a goal towards highlighting the quality of the educational act. One may observe a shift in view regarding the role of education and investment therein: the transition from the *informative* to the *educational*. One must transform traditional education to a modern and dynamic one that fulfills today's requirements and is based on efficient communication. No longer is education allowed to draw the line at mere information gathering. We now live in a world of information: the Internet, modern means of communication, new media – consequently requiring new aptitudes, a new context of communication and whole new dimensions of education. Therefore, we may not view education as a sheer teacher-to-student transfer of information, but as an entire process based upon efficient communication, feedback and information exchange.
In such context, contemporary higher education communication strategies, emphasizes on quality, performance assurance and knowledge.

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