



NLS Department

Tutorial N°1 – Intrapersonal communication¹

When you answer the question, “What are you doing?” what do you write? Eating at your favorite restaurant? Working on a slow evening? Reading your favorite book on a Kindle? Preferring the feel of paper to keyboard? Reading by candlelight? In each case you are communicating what you are doing, but you may not be communicating why, or what it means to you. That communication may be internal, but is it only an internal communication process?

Intrapersonal communication can be defined as communication with one’s self, and that may include self-talk, acts of imagination and visualization, and even recall and memory (McLean, S., 2005). You read on your cell phone screen that your friends are going to have dinner at your favorite restaurant. What comes to mind? Sights, sounds, and scents? Something special that happened the last time you were there? Do you contemplate joining them? Do you start to work out a plan of getting from your present location to the restaurant? Do you send your friends a text asking if they want company? Until the moment when you hit the “send” button, you are communicating with yourself.

Communications expert Leonard Shedletsky examines intrapersonal communication through the eight basic components of the communication process (i.e., source, receiver, message, channel, feedback, environment, context, and interference) as transactional, but all the interaction occurs within the individual (Shedletsky, L. J., 1989). Perhaps, as you consider whether to leave your present location and join your friends at the restaurant, you are aware of all the work that sits in front of you. You may hear the voice of your boss, or perhaps of one of your parents, admonishing you about personal responsibility and duty. On the other hand, you may imagine the friends at the restaurant saying something to the effect of “you deserve some time off!”

At the same time as you argue with yourself, Judy Pearson and Paul Nelson would be quick to add that intrapersonal communication is not only your internal monologue but also involves your efforts to plan how to get to the restaurant (Pearson, J. and Nelson, P., 1985). From planning to problem solving, internal conflict resolution, and evaluations and judgments of self and others, we communicate with ourselves through intrapersonal communication.

All this interaction takes place in the mind without externalization, and all of it relies on previous interaction with the external world. If you had been born in a different country, to different parents, what language would you speak? What language would you think in? What would you value, what would be important to you, and what would not? Even as you argue to yourself whether the prospect of joining your friends at the restaurant overcomes your need to complete your work, you use language and symbols that were communicated to you. Your language and culture have given you the means to rationalize, act, and answer the question, “What are you doing?” but you are still bound by the expectations of yourself and the others who make up your community.

Key Takeaway

In intrapersonal communication, we communicate with ourselves.

¹ Business communication success, 2015, University of Minnesota libraries publishing.

Exercises

1. Describe what you are doing, pretending you are another person observing yourself. Write your observations down or record them with a voice or video recorder. Discuss the exercise with your classmates.
2. Think of a time when you have used self-talk—for example, giving yourself “I can do this!” messages when you are striving to meet a challenge, or “what’s the use?” messages when you are discouraged. Did you purposely choose to use self-talk, or did it just happen? Discuss your thoughts with classmates.
3. Take a few minutes and visualize what you would like your life to be like a year from now, or five years from now. Do you think this visualization exercise will influence your actions and decisions in the future? Compare your thoughts with those of your classmates.

References

- McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Shedletsky, L. J. (1989). *Meaning and mind: An interpersonal approach to human communication*. ERIC Clearinghouse on reading and communication skills. Bloomington, IN: ERIC.