

It's hard to get your message across sometimes. When I write this column each month, I am often reminded how hard it can be to get a message out of my head and into yours with some accuracy and in the right context, with few, if any, grammar/spelling and punctuation mistakes, all while trying to be interesting and maybe even entertaining.

Communication slip-ups happen all the time. I was driving and talking on the phone (hands-free, safety first) with my father-in-law when he asked me what I was doing later. "I'm actually having dinner with the Board of Regents tonight," I said. He replied, "Dinner with the Puerto Ricans?!? What Puerto Ricans?" I guess "Board of Regents" and "Puerto Ricans" sounds pretty similar when you are driving and talking on a cell phone.

Other mistakes lead to, shall we say, unintended connotations. My wife and I had a similar upbringing in that the word "butt" is considered a crass term, and a near cuss word like "heck" and "darn," all of which were banned in our respective houses growing up. That's the context of the story.

If you inadvertently call someone it is commonly referred in today's vernacular as "butt dialing." But since Jen can't say that b-word, she made what she thought was an acceptable substitution one day when talking with our then-teenaged daughters.

"I accidentally booty-called your father today."

"MOM! Don't say that!" the girls screamed in reply. If you don't know what a "booty call" is, you might ask your kids or older grandkids, but make sure you are ready for them to be shocked that you asked. Trust me, it's not a telephone call about infant footwear. We now use the term "pocket dialed" for an inadvertent phone call. Isn't that nicer?

Proper and effective communication is incredibly important, not only in the conveying of an idea, but also, not embarrassing your daughters.

At NCCC, communicating effectively is one of the four general education outcomes we teach to all those getting an associate degree. If you are wondering, the other three are analytical thinking, citizenship, and healthy lifestyle. These are the areas that we believe are important for degree-earning college graduates.

We measure the level of learning in these four areas every year in specific courses that range across the required curriculum where these outcomes are taught. Instructors let us know on a scheduled basis how the students did on individual course learning outcomes that speak to the general education. For instance, the outcomes for Communicating Effectively are found in eleven different courses such as English composition classes, Fundamentals of Speech, and Interpersonal Communication.

While we teach all four outcomes every year, we do choose one particular general education outcome annually and focus on improving the learning in that area. This year, you guessed it, we focused on effective communication. The measurements for learning in this area show good results but have been a bit stagnant lately. Our overall goal for learning at NCCC is continuous improvement. We want our students to always be getting a bit better at the learning outcomes. We want to never be complacent or settle for so-so learning. We want to continually be breathing new life, new ideas, and new energy into our courses. Good scores are good, but we always want better.

The faculty have been doing that with their efforts to improve learning in this selected outcome area. Every faculty meeting the Chief Academic Officer leads a discussion on effective communication instruction and offers resources to help faculty. Faculty members respond with ideas they have been trying and the results they are getting.

Different ideas are underway such as adding an interactive bulletin board in the hallway that quizzes viewers on communication practices in different parts of the world. They are also leading student discussions on something sorely needed today – How to have a civil conversation on sensitive topics. Remember when we could talk about tough issues without yelling, naming calling, and threats of violence? I sure do, and I miss those days.

Professors are using techniques to draw out introverted students so that they too can actively participate in class discussions. They are assigning more group projects that discuss the benefits of listening, asking questions, and expressing feelings in a respectful way. The professors themselves are modeling good communication skills for their students by being interested in them on a more personal level.

Professors are providing resources for instructors who are not part of the eleven classes of this outcome to add emphasis on effective communication where appropriate. Many classes assign a paper or have classroom discussions, so all could use these techniques to make these assignments more meaningful no matter the course.

I applaud this effort to improve student learning across the college in the area of general education and specifically in communicating effectively. Discourse in the country has deteriorated in the level of civility (I blame social media for that), in the quality of the message (I blame text-speak for ruining the written English language), and in the near-end of objectivity. Some deeply flawed messages today go beyond simple bias, instead slant every communication to someone's world view, all at the expense of the truth. It has been called a "post-truth" world. I hope our efforts to teach effective communication combats this cancer most of all.

Communicating effectively is a difficult skill to learn to say the least. For some it comes naturally, while others struggle mightily. In this new world where everyone has a bullhorn in their pocket in the form of their cell phone that can send messages to most of the people on the planet, teaching students how to communicate responsibly is paramount.

And maybe they can learn how not to pocket dial someone at the same time.

For questions or comments about this column, or anything else please communicate effectively with me at binbody@neosho.edu.

