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## Academic Freedom, Public Art, & Private Universities: Examining the Expression of Communication at USD

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Academic Freedom, Public Art, & Private Universities:  
Examining the Expression of Communication at USD

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty and the Honors Program

Of the University of San Diego

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By

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2016

### Abstract

This present case study explores how language styles and power distance led to miscommunication between an administrator and student via computer mediated communication. Email exchanges were examined using textual analysis between an administrator and an undergraduate student. Results indicate high-context and low-context communication and power distance roles led to problematic actions and decisions. Furthermore, divergent speech with regard to communication styles was an additional problematic. Implications of the results specific examples of how this interaction could have been prevented were discussed.

*Keywords: low/high context, computer-mediated communication, miscommunication*

## Academic Freedom, Public Art, & Private Universities:

### Examining the Expression of Communication at USD

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the e-mail transcriptions between a student and administrator to determine high/low context communication, power distance, and divergence, in order to explain the miscommunication that occurred between them. The specific case study stems from a series of controversial events that occurred at the University of San Diego during the spring of 2015. The case study revolves around a student's guerilla art show and the destruction of her thesis work. Research revealed an e-mail thread between a student and an administrator that started a series of events, which resulted in the creation of a new public art process at the University of San Diego. This study seeks to understand the communication pattern that occurred between the student and the administrator to determine what communication studies factors led them to miscommunication. In this study, an analysis of high/low-context communication will examine differences in communication styles, as will an analysis of power distance and formality. The qualitative results are discussed in terms of the cultural frameworks used in the analyses, as well as noticeable trends.

#### **Terms & Concepts**

The following terms are the cultural dimensions that were chosen as the theoretical and objective lenses to study the real life scenario that occurred in this case study. The aim of the study is to use communication theory in tandem with culture to study the events and communication that occurred within the framework of USD. Ting-Toomey's research on culture is the key to connecting Hall and Hofstede's research in this communication framework.

## **Culture**

Ting-Toomey is a Communication Studies theorist from CSU Fullerton who specializes in studying culture and how it affects the way individuals communicate, particularly cross-culturally. Ting-Toomey notes how hard it is to describe culture, because it has a myriad of definitions. For the purpose of her research, Ting-Toomey (1999) defines culture as, “a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community” (p. 10). For the purpose of this study, particular attention is paid to the visible and invisible aspects of culture that Ting-Toomey describes through the cultural iceberg (Ting-Toomey, 1999). The cultural iceberg shows that when individuals interact, they only see surface-level aspects of each other’s culture, such as trends, clothing, and verbal and nonverbal symbols (Ting-Toomey, 1999). These traits are the small part of an iceberg that is above water. The larger part of the iceberg that remains below the water represents the deeper levels of an individual’s culture that cannot be seen, such as traditions, beliefs, and values. Those deeper values that aren’t seen in an interaction are what drive an individual’s thoughts and actions (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Therefore, the deeper layers are highly important to how individuals communicate with one another and act in daily life.

## **Language Styles**

**Hall’s Elements of High/Low-Context Communication.** Hall’s (1976) concept of low-context and high-context communication was used to analyze the e-mail transcription between the student and the administrator. Hall (1967) defines low-context communication as, “the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code,” (p. 79). In other words, the verbal message is clear and direct. For example, in the United States it is common to detail one’s weekend plans to

the friend that inquires. Therefore, a low-context statement would be, “On Saturday I am working out at the gym until noon, walking the dog at the park until lunch, buying groceries, and making dinner by 6pm.”

On the other hand, Hall (1967) defines high-context communication as, “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (p. 79). Overall, a high-context message is more likely to be less descriptive and explicit, because it relies on surrounding context, background information, and sometimes assumed information. For instance, in China it is less common to express personal feelings in an informal conversation, therefore a high-context message would be, “I’m doing fine.” This statement avoids offering any specifics about how the individual is feeling.

**Culture.** Referring back to Ting-Toomey’s research on culture, she took Hall’s research on high/low-context communication and tied it to individual versus collective cultures. In the case of this study, the context is the United States, which is an individualistic culture. This means that the individual is valued over the group, and uses communication to satisfy individual needs over group needs or others. A collective culture would value the needs of the group over the individual and communicate accordingly (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

**Communication Divergence.** Giles (1991) theorized Communication Accommodation Theory, which includes divergence defined as, “a communication strategy of accentuating the differences between you and another person”. This would mean using a communication style that actively differentiates one’s communication from that of the other communicator. For instance, if an individual addressed the other as “Mr. Johnson” and Mr. Johnson responded by calling the original communicator “Sally,” this would be an example of divergence. Sally used Mr.

Johnson's formal title, but he diverged from her communication style and only used her first name.

### **Value Dimensions**

Hofstede theorized a series of cultural dimensions that can be studied in terms of any culture. The most important dimension for this study is power distance. Hofstede (1984) defines power distance as the, "extent to which the less powerful members of institutions...accept that power is distributed unequally" (p. 419 via Ting-Toomey, pg. 69). This means that in small power distance institutions, power is distributed evenly and the institution is fairly egalitarian. Large power distance institutions have an unequal distribution of power that segregates individuals based upon the power of their position. Power distance comes into play at USD in the situational frame and will be explored in the discussion. An example of small power distance is the United States, which is a democracy that values egalitarian systems of government. An example of high power distance is North Korea, because there is a very clear segregation based on power between the ruler and the ruled.

Just as she connected Hall's concepts, Ting-Toomey has similarly linked Hofstede's cultural dimensions to her research on culture. Ting-Toomey tied individual cultures to small power distance structures and collective cultures to large power distance structures. There are exceptions to these findings, but these are the predominant results (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

### **Ting-Toomey, Hall, & Hofstede**

In this case study, two individuals in an individualistic culture are being examined. Due to the context of the individualistic culture, the two subjects are expected to be using low-context communication based on Ting-Toomey and Hall's research. Also, the individuals are expected to be operating within a small power distance institution, based on Ting-Toomey and Hofstede's

research. These cultural dimensions were chosen as a framework for examining the communication between the two individuals to observe whether they operated within their expected cultural norms (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

### **Methods**

Two main analyses were used for this paper. The first analysis is a high-low context, phrase-by-phrase analysis. The second analysis examined personal formality of sentence structure and use of power distance in the messages.

#### **High/Low-Context Analysis**

U.S. Americans have been ranked with stronger values associated with individualism. However, both high-context and low-context communication patterns are present in the U.S. culture. To assess whether or not the administrator or student communication high-context or low-context communication, the individual phrases in each e-mail were analyzed. Instead of analyzing sentence-by-sentence, individual phrases were analyzed, because sentences could have both low-context and high-context phrases. Only key content sentences were included in this analysis, meaning sentences that were important to the overall purpose of the message. Key content sentences would exclude greetings, thanks, apologies, and niceties. The descriptive qualities of phrases were examined in terms of included/excluded details and information to determine high/low-context communication. In this e-mail analysis, blue text represents low-context communication and red signifies high-context communication.

#### **Power Distance & Formality Analysis**

This analysis studied the formality of the messages and the manner in which the administrator and student communicated. This information was used to interpret power distance roles and others trends. The greetings, thanks, apologies, and niceties were more important in



this analysis than the high/low-context analysis, because they illustrate formality more than key content sentences do. Formal language would include introductions and conclusions of e-mail, as well as the use of names in terms of how the student and the administrator addressed themselves and each other.

### Other Factors

For the purpose of this study and research paper, the individuals involved have been kept anonymous, because they are identifiable members of the USD community. Lastly, interviews were conducted with the student and the administrator seven months after the events of the case study occurred. The interviews are not analyzed in this study, but provide supporting background information for the discussion.

### Breakdown of the E-mails

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February 11, 2015 12:42AM

Dear Administrator, (Prefix and last name) [Formal]

My name is Student and I am a senior Visual Arts major. Every major must complete a thesis exhibition, and my project consists of photographs and a film that explore what it means to live in the US-Mexico borderlands. I am interested in showing the work in the hallway between Tu Mercado and the UC Forums.

I e-mailed a proposal to Jane Doe and she directed me to you. Attached is my Visual Art Exhibition Request. Please let me know what you think, and if you have any questions or concerns please e-mail or call me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. Thank you!

Sincerely, [Formal]

Student (First & last names)

LC = 4.5 HC = 1.5

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This was the first e-mail exchange that began the communication channel between the student and the administrator. The first sentence was low-context and clear, and explained who the student was. The second sentence transitioned from high-context to low-context as the student described her senior thesis exhibition. The third sentence of the first paragraph was an unclear, high-context description of a space.

In the second paragraph, Student used low-context communication and was explicit in describing how she was referred to Administrator, the inclusion of his or her proposal in the e-mail attachments, and her contact information. Student used concrete details to describe what she requested and how Administrator could contact her for the next steps in the process.

Student began and concluded this e-mail with formal language. In terms of key content sentences, this message was approximately 25% high context and 75% low context.

---

February 11, 2015 3:13PM

Hi Student, (First name) [Informal]

Thank you for forwarding your senior thesis exhibition proposal. Unfortunately the corridor you are requesting has quite a bit of construction underway for the Torero Store and would not be recommended for your installation. I am not sure about the availability of the adjacent Exhibit Hall, but if that could serve as an alternate location and would not be impacted by the construction.

For works installed in our public spaces on campus, we would need to review the actual works prior to installation. If these are installed in the Exhibit Hall or the Visual Art Center we have much more flexibility. Perhaps take a look at the Exhibit Hall option and let me know your thoughts.

Best regards...Administrator (First name) [Informal]

LC = 1   HC = 4

---

Administrator opened and closed the e-mail informally. The first sentence was positive and thanked Student for initiating the process with a full proposal. The second sentence was a high-context and indirect description of Administrator's definition of the proposed space. The third sentence continued the high-context pattern of this message with vague language that proposed an alternate space.

Overall, the second paragraph is high-context. Administrator used low-context language to explain the process for reviewing the works to be displayed. The following sentence was high-context and vaguely described the benefits of alternative exhibition spaces. The final sentence of the second paragraph was high-context in describing the next actions Administrator wanted Student to take.

In terms of key content sentences, this message was approximately 80% high context and 20% low context.

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February 11, 2015 5:53PM

Dear Administrator, (Prefix and last name) [Formal]

Thank you for getting back to me so quickly. I am sitting in Professor X's class now and she thought it would be great if we could all put our heads together to brainstorm ways in which the exhibition might work in the space. I don't mind the construction at all and I am happy share the twelve photographs and film I am proposing to show. Are you available to meet at any time either tomorrow or Friday? Thank you!

Student (First and last names) [Semi-formal]

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LC = 1.75 HC = 1.25

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Student began the e-mail formally, but switched to an informal conclusion. In the second sentence, Student suggested an alternative to Administrator's suggestion indirectly through low-context to high-context communication. Student stated her location and the purpose of the suggestion through descriptive, low-context communication. Then, she used a high-context, vague description to refer back to the proposed space. Student used direct, low-context communication to describe her opinion of the construction in the space. Student provided a low-context description of the pieces she was prepared to show. Student concluded with a high-context request to meet with Administrator in person. Student thanked Administrator at the conclusion of the e-mail.

In terms of key content sentences, this message was approximately 41.7% high context and 58.3% low context.

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February 16, 2015 9:32AM

Dear Administrator, (Prefix and last name) [Formal]

I am following up with my previous e-mail about meeting with you. I have all of the photographs

I am proposing to show in a portfolio. Are you available to meet sometime early this week?

Thank you!

Student (First and last names) [Semi-formal]

LC = 2 HC = 1

---

Several days passed and Student did not receive a response from Administrator. Student sent another e-mail to Administrator before Administrator responded to the previous message. Student continued the formal greeting pattern and began this message with a low-context

description of the purpose for the e-mail. She used direct, low-context communication to reiterate the message from the previous e-mail that the proposed works were ready to be shown for approval. Student concluded the e-mail with a high-context request to meet with Administrator.

In terms of key content sentences, this message was approximately 33.3% high context and 66.6% low context.

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Administrator sent a message via a phone call from her assistant to inform the student that there were spaces in Aromas or IPJ that were available for exhibition of works (J. Grant, personal communication, October 30, 2015). Administrator did not address the original location proposed by Student and offered alternative locations instead.

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February 24, 2015 3:48PM

Dear Administrator, (Prefix and last name) [Formal]

I hope you are well. I am very grateful for your offerings of the spaces in Aromas and in the IPJ, but I am still curious about the corridor I requested to use. The contractor in charge of the Torero Store construction let me know that the corridor I have requested as shown in my proposal is completely finished and that there are no hazards in the space. Since the construction in that space is done, would I be able to show the work there March 9th - 13th? Thank you!

Student (First and last names) [Semi-formal]

LC = 2.3 HC = 0.7

---

Student continued the pattern of a formal introduction, using Administrator's prefix and last name to show respect for her authority. Student offered low-context gratitude for the

proposed spaces, therefore not avoiding Administrator's suggestions. But, Student continued the sentence with a high-context reversion to her interest in the originally proposed location. Student followed this transition with a low-context description of her encounter with the contractor for the construction and the availability of his or her proposed space. Student continued with another request to use the originally proposed space and used low-context communication to offer the specific details of the proposal, except for a high-context reference to "the work". Again, Student concludes the e-mail with an expression of gratitude for Administrator's continued participation in the communication chain and an informal signature.

In terms of key content sentences, this message was approximately 23.3% high context and 76.7% low context.

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February 25, 2015 3:30PM

Hi Student, (First name) [Informal]

The corridor in the SLP/UC area is not completely finished as it has a temporary construction wall in place that will remain through May while the Torero Store is constructed. If you wish to use a public venue, please consider either Aromas or the KIPJ locations I had suggested, otherwise we most likely would not be able to fulfill your request. If you wish to consider Aromas or the KIPJ, I will need to know which location so that I can coordinate with the area managers of the spaces to allow you to have access to install your works.

Let us know...Administrator [Informal]

LC = 3 HC = 0

---

Administrator continued her pattern of an informal introduction to the e-mail. She then acknowledged the repeated suggestion of Student, but rejected Student's assertion about the

proposed corridor. In Administrator's elaboration of reasoning for rejecting the space, low-context communication was used that was fairly descriptive of the spatial situation.

Administrator switched to a formal, low-context request for Student's consideration of the other two venues that were suggested. She was very direct and low-context in stating that those were the only two alternatives at that point in time. The e-mail concluded with a low-context request from Administrator that asked Student to make a decision and respond accordingly. This message was 100% low-context.

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February 26, 2015 9:12AM

Dear Administrator, (Prefix and last name) [Formal]

I apologize for not being more specific about which exact hallway I am requesting. I think we have been talking about two different hallways all along. I have attached pictures of the specific space and walls I am proposing to use. I am so sorry for this confusion! Please let me know if using this hallway would be possible. Thank you,

Student (First and last names) [Semi-formal]

LC = 3 HC = 0

---

Student continued a formal introduction pattern to the e-mail and followed with a formal, direct introductory apology for her lack of specificity in the previous message. The next sentence was a low-context reference to the images Student attached to the e-mail for further clarification of the contested space. Student concluded the e-mail semi-formally with a casual ending and full name signature. This message was 100% low-context.

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February 26, 2015 12:54PM

Hi Student, (First name) [Informal]

I am not able to open these images, it appears to take me to a torero log in page??

If the images represent the UC/SLP corridor by Franks Lounge, then this is still not an option.

The KIPJ asked if you were still interested as did the manager of Aromas. If either of these locations will work, we need to coordinate how the works will be installed and how the walls will be repaired and touched up after installation. If you are not interested in either of these spaces, please let me know so I can inform them.

Best regards,

Administrator (First name) [Formal]

LC = 3.25 HC = 0.75

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Administrator used the consistent e-mail introduction that she used for the entirety of this e-mail thread. She began the message directly with low-context language stating that the attached photographs could not be opened and to what they redirected her. Administrator used a high-context transition back to her previous suggestions and did not address Student's suggestion. The third sentence was low-context and briefly described the next steps that would be necessary if Student wanted to move forward. Administrator concluded with a low-context request for clarification and response before using an informal signature that was slightly more formal than the one used on February 25<sup>th</sup>. This message was approximately 18.75% high-context and 81.25% low-context.

---

February 26, 2015 3:52PM

Dear Administrator, (Prefix and last name) [Formal]



The images do represent the UC/SLP corridor by Frank's Lounge. I apologize that they did not come through. Would it help if I perhaps showed the images in the hallway for a single day in the space, given that there is no construction? Thank you,

Student (First and last names) [Semi-formal]

LC = 1.33 HC = 0.67

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Student responded to the e-mail from Administrator within three hours and maintained formal e-mail qualities. She clarified the space represented by the images that could not be opened using a low-context, direct statement. Student did not acknowledge Administrator's suggestions, but instead reverted to the original proposal. Student used low-context language to contradict Administrator's assertion that construction was still ongoing in the space by stating that there was no construction in the space. Student signed the e-mail in the same semi-formal manner and left that question in the Administrator's hands. This message was approximately 33.5% high-context and 66.5% low-context.

---

Following this e-mail, before the guerrilla show events, there was a break in communication between Student and Administrator. Whether an e-mail was overlooked, forgotten, or lost to the Internet, both Student and Administrator have stated in interviews that they did not receive a message back from the other. Administrator did not recall receiving a message back from Student after the last suggestion of the other two spaces (M. Whelan, personal communication, October 20, 2015). Student stated that after the last e-mail she sent on February 26<sup>th</sup> there was no response Administrator (J. Grant, personal communication, October 30, 2015). Student also stated that multiple attempts to meet with Administrator in person were

proposed, but Administrator did not accommodate Student's request (J. Grant, personal communication, October 30, 2015).

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March 12, 2015 12:23PM

Dear Student, (First name) [Formal]

It has just come to my attention that your images have been placed in various locations around the UC/SLP. There is a process in place for posting on our campus kiosks and at outdoor locations on campus that is monitored by University Centers and Student Life Activities. Since this process was not followed nor discussed as far as exhibiting your works, the images are being removed and you should be able to pick them up in SLP301.

Administrator (First name) [Semi-formal]

LC = 2 HC = 1

---

This was the only message that was exchanged between Administrator and Student after Student had a guerilla show of her work on campus. A guerilla show, meaning that Student chose to subvert the process for public art work on campus after failed communication with Administrator, and put her work up without permission. Administrator sent this e-mail as the first record communication between the two after February 26<sup>th</sup>.

Of all the e-mails sent between Administrator and Student, this was the only time Administrator used a formal introduction to the e-mail. The message was fairly low-context, with a high-context introduction. Administrator vaguely described the action that she realized Student had taken and stated that there was an official process for such postings. Administrator is low-context in explaining why Student's works were removed and the location where they could be picked up. There is a short and informal conclusion to this e-mail by Administrator with simply

his or her first name. Explicitly, this message is approximately 67% low-context and 33% high-context.

### **Analysis**

The percentages of high/low-context communication in each e-mail are in the breakdown above. The total communication for the student and the administrator are totaled and compared in this section. The use of formality and non-key content sentences are described here but will be interpreted in the discussion.

#### **Student**

Student sent Administrator 14.88 low-context content statements and 5.12 high-context content statements. Therefore, approximately 74.4% of Student's communication was low context in this situation and 25.6% was high context. Overall, Student sent more formal messages and apologies or displays of gratitude than Administrator.

#### **Administrator**

Including the message after the period of silence in the communicative thread, Administrator sent approximately 9.25 low-context statements and 5.75 high-context statements to Student. Accordingly, approximately 61.7% of Administrator's communication was low-context and approximately 38.3% was high-context. Administrator communicated outside the e-mail thread once, which is undocumented. Administrator sent fewer messages than Student, but sent one more after the guerilla show events. Administrator used predominantly informal language and few apologies or displays of gratitude.

#### **Summary**

Although an uneven number of e-mail statements were exchanged by the dyad, their percentages of high/low-context used per person in the entire exchange were noticeably

different. Although qualitative approximations of high/low-context communication were used in this study, the fact that the two subjects used communication styles that were primarily low-context is surprising. For the amount of miscommunication that occurred, a greater divide in the levels of high/low-context communication used by each participant was anticipated.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Mediated Communication**

One of the biggest communication factors missing in this conversation was a lack of face-to-face communication. The entire conversation was computer-mediated, excluding the phone call from the administrator's assistant to the student. If the individuals had met in person, perhaps they would have expressed their ideas more clearly than they did in the computer-mediated e-mail channel.

The student was the only individual to admit fault for the miscommunication over the proposal by using phrases such as, "I am so sorry for this confusion!" (Appendix A, Figure 7). But, this should have been shared fault between the student and the administrator, because both contributed to the miscommunication. If the fault had been shared, the conversation would have been more egalitarian and might have been easier to navigate.

Although the administrator and the student both claimed to have sent the last e-mail to each other before the break in communication, the e-mail transcription from Gmail shows the student as having sent the last e-mail. By not responding to the student, the administrator broke the e-mail chain, which led to the student to execute her guerrilla art show. If the communication channel between the individuals had remained open, perhaps they would have eventually reached a solution. If a consensus was reached, the guerrilla art show might not have happened and the destruction of the student's work could have been avoided.

As previously discussed, there are prescribed power distance roles that distance individuals in terms of power, such as administration, faculty, staff, and student positions. The student and administrator acted within those prescribed power roles and the conversation was not egalitarian. This was demonstrated with the fault falling more on the student than the administrator. Therefore, if the two had communicated on a more level playing field, the conversation could have benefited and possibly continued without breaking.

### **Trends**

Trends linked to culture and power distance arose during the process of conducting an analysis of the e-mail transcriptions. Specifically, use of formality in communication styles, admission of fault as a form of respect, a difference in the definition of the proposed space, avoidance of suggestions, and continual divergence. Examples of each will be discussed following concluding thoughts.

**Formality.** The communicators in this study continually diverged in their email response to each other. The student initiated the conversation with formal communication, using terms such as “dear,” “sincerely,” her first and last name, and the administrator’s prefix and last name. These characteristics continued in most of the correspondence from the student. In comparison, the administrator responded to the initial e-mail with informal language, such as, “hi”, the student’s first name, her first name, and signed the e-mail formally with “best regards”. The administrator’s informal communication style continued in this manner. The one exception was the end of the email thread, when the administrator notified the student of the removal of her work from public campus space.

The student continued the use of formality. The administrator remained informal in his/her style. This reflects a divergent approach in communication. Instead of code switching or

altering their communication to accommodate one another they maintained their own styles. Although many factors may have contributed to the divergence, power distance may be the main reason. The high power distance structure at USD placed the administrator in a more powerful role than the student. Therefore, the student was expected to show a certain level of respect to the administrator. The administrator had more lenience in her level of respect shown to the student than she might have when communicating with an individual ranked higher than her, such as the president. The student likely approached the administrator formally as a form of respect for her elevated position. The administrator was informal in his/her communication with the student, because there was less pressure on her to be formal and most likely wanted to make the conversation more casual. If the two communicators had converged and either used formal communication or informal communication, it might have reduced their miscommunication.

**Admission of Fault.** Signifiers of respect for power distance between the student and the administrator arose in the occurrences of admission of fault. The student apologized or admitted fault for three different parts of the e-mail communication thread. The student assumed the fault to respect the administrator. The administrator accepted no fault for the confusion experienced in communication with the student. In a high power distance relationship, fault is more likely to fall on the less powerful individual, which is why the student assumed it to save-face and continue the communication thread with the administrator.

By admitting fault, the student put herself in a position of being wrong in this conversation, which contributed to the administrator's power in the interaction. If the administrator had admitted fault for the miscommunication, perhaps the student would have accommodated the administrator's requests more readily. Neither individual accommodated the

other, which is probably an outcome of power distance that could have been helped if the communication styles had converged to share the fault of the miscommunication of details.

**Difference in Definition.** The student and the administrator did not explicitly delineate the corridor they were discussing, because they ineffectively described the space via e-mails and never met in person. The student described the corridor and attempted to send images, which the administrator was unable to open. Therefore, the student and the administrator each had a mental definition of the corridor, but not a shared definition. This confusion over the definition of the space arose frequently in the conversation. The entire conversation revolved around the student's request to use a space that could not be jointly defined by the student and administrator. Not having a shared understanding of the contested space was likely a major underlying problem in this communication thread. The student insisted there was no construction in her proposed space and the administrator was adamant that there was. The hallway itself was attached to a construction site but was open to pedestrian traffic and had no physical obstructions.

Solutions to this problem would have included the student trying to resend images to the administrator, the administrator again attempting to open the images sent by the student, or for the two individuals to meet and to walk through the contested corridor together. Face-to-face communication might have included enough low-context information or details to prevent a large portion of the miscommunication that occurred between the two communicators. But the two individuals maintained a strictly computer-mediated communication format, which meant that the most likely solution to reaching a joint definition of the requested space would have been to send more photographs.

**Avoidance.** Another theme observed in this communication thread was an avoidance of the acknowledgment or investigation of the ideas of the other communicator in the pair. The

student acknowledged a couple of the administrator's suggestions, but did not respond to them directly or follow-up on them. This kept the administrator in a space of waiting for a response from the student to her suggestions. The administrator addressed the student's ideas, but she was not open to negotiation or delving into the original and continually reiterated proposal. The student was persistent in her proposal, but the administrator was equally persistent in avoiding it.

By avoiding direct confrontation or elaboration of the ideas of the opposite communicator in this e-mail thread, there was no forward momentum in the conversation. Both individuals were tied to their original ideas and were unwilling to explore the other individual's ideas. This back and forth of suggestions and avoidance ultimately led to the stalemate in which the administrator seemingly did not respond to the student. At this point, the student took steps to execute the exhibition without the administrator's approval.

As the ideas of the communicators continually diverged, the level of positive or more lighthearted communication decreased and was replaced by basic, more straightforward sentences. If the conversation had remained open to new ideas and change instead of being resistant, perhaps the student and the administrator would have had a more productive conversational experience.

### **Importance of Study**

A number of questions arose from this case study, such as... Was the proposal blocked due to controversial material or was the hallway really unusable? Was personal preference involved here? Were these two individuals simply poor communicators within the context of USD's positional frame? These questions may never be answered, because there isn't enough documentation of the individual thoughts and opinions of the student and the administrator.



In this case study, issues of academic freedom arose with the destruction of the student's work. Academic freedom is a very serious issue on university campuses, because it is expected to be held above all other values. The student operated outside the University's posting process by holding the guerrilla exhibition, therefore, the removal of her works from campus was appropriate. But the destruction of the student's work was a major breach of academic freedom, and it could have caused major problems for the University. The positive outcome of this miscommunication and case study, is the creation of a new public art process at USD, which is currently being transformed into a policy. This new policy is transparent and has a committee of individuals to make decisions, instead of one person.

Lastly, as this case study has demonstrated, communication between students and administrators is very important. Students and faculty members communicate regularly, but students and administrators communicate much less frequently. Administrators make major decisions on behalf of students, which means they should be able to communicate with one another effectively. This study showed how easy it can be for a student to miscommunicate with an administrator and why face-to-face communication can become essential.

### **Summary**

In this present study, miscommunication between a student and an administrator led to higher levels of low-context communication. However, with use of high-context communication divergence combined with issues of power distance, formality, unclearly defined space, and avoidance of proposals resulted in failed communication. Computer-mediated communication is a reduced form of communication, which most likely highlighted the problems in this conversation. Perhaps if the student and administrator had an opportunity to meet face-to-face, their conversation would have likely been a much different and much more beneficial one. There

were both positive and negative outcomes from this case study, but the key outcome was how easily ideas and individuals can be misconstrued and misunderstood in the e-mail platform.

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## Appendix A

Figure 1:

Dear Ms. Whelan,

My name is Jillian Grant and I am a senior Visual Arts major. Every major must complete a thesis exhibition, and my project consists of photographs and a film that explore what it means to live in the US-Mexico borderlands. I am interested in showing the work in the hallway between Tu Mercado and the UC Forums.

I emailed a proposal to Ms. Manriquez and she directed me to you. Attached is my Visual Art Exhibition Request. Please let me know what you think, and if you have any questions or concerns please email or call me at [\(413\) 552 - 9178](tel:4135529178). Thank you!

Sincerely,

Jillian Grant  
[jiliangrantphotography.com](http://jiliangrantphotography.com)

Figure 2:

Hi Jillian,  
Thank you for forwarding your senior thesis exhibition proposal. Unfortunately the corridor you are requesting has quite a bit of construction underway for the Torero Store and would not be recommended for your installation. I am not sure about the availability of the adjacent Exhibit Hall, but if that could serve as an alternate location and would not be impacted by the construction.

For works installed in our public spaces on campus, we would need to review the actual works prior to installation. If these are installed in the Exhibit Hall or the Visual Art Center we have much more flexibility. Perhaps take a look at the Exhibit Hall option and let me know your thoughts.  
Best regards...Mary

Figure 3:

Dear Ms. Whelan,

Thank you for getting back to me so quickly. I am sitting in Professor Yard's class now and she thought it would be great if we could all put our heads together to brainstorm ways in which the exhibition might work in the space. I don't mind the construction at all and I am happy share the twelve photographs and film I am proposing to show. Are you available to meet at any time either tomorrow or Friday? Thank you!

Jillian Grant

Figure 4:

Dear Ms. Whelan,

I am following up with my previous email about meeting with you. I have all of the photographs I am proposing to show in a portfolio. Are you available to meet sometime early this week? Thank you!

Jillian Grant

Figure 5:

Dear Ms. Whelan,

I hope you are well. I am very grateful for your offerings of the spaces in Aromas and in the IPJ, but I am still curious about the corridor I requested to use. The contractor in charge of the Torero Store construction let me know that the corridor I have requested as shown in my proposal is completely finished and that there are no hazards in the space. Since the construction in that space is done, would I be able to show the work there March 9th - 13th? Thank you!

Jillian Grant

Figure 6:

Hi Jillian,

The corridor in the SLP/UC area is not completely finished as it has a temporary construction wall in place that will remain through May while the Torero Store is constructed. If you wish to use a public venue, please consider either Aromas or the KIPJ locations I had suggested, otherwise we most likely would not be able to fulfill your request. If you wish to consider Aromas or the KIPJ, I will need to know which location so that I can coordinate with the area managers of the spaces to allow you to have access to install your works.

Let us know...Mary

Figure 7:

Dear Ms. Whelan,

I apologize for not being more specific about which exact hallway I am requesting. I think we have been talking about two different hallways all along. I have attached pictures of the specific space and walls I am proposing to use. I am so sorry for this confusion! Please let me know if using this hallway would be possible. Thank you,

Jillian Grant

Figure 8:

Hi Jillian,

I am not able to open these images, it appears to take me to a torero log in page??

If the images represent the UC/SLP corridor by Franks Lounge, then this is still not an option. The KIPJ asked if you were still interested as did the manager of Aromas. If either of these locations will work, we need to coordinate how the works will be installed and how the walls will be repaired and touched up after installation. If you are not interested in either of these spaces, please let me know so I can inform them.

Best regards,

Mary

Figure 9:

Dear Ms. Whelan,

The images do represent the UC/SLP corridor by Frank's Lounge. I apologize that they did not come through. Would it help if I perhaps showed the images in the hallway for a single day in the space, given that there is no construction? Thank you,

Jillian Grant

Figure 10:

Dear Jillian,

It has just come to my attention that your images have been placed in various locations around the UC/SLP. There is a process in place for posting on our campus kiosks and at outdoor locations on campus that is monitored by University Centers and Student Life Activities. Since this process was not followed nor discussed as far as exhibiting your works, the images are being removed and you should be able to pick them up in SLP301.

Mary

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