The Many Faces of Communication Quality

When it comes to quantity, you can easily measure and quantify, the length of an instructional text, the number of words and images used in an ad, or the duration of a sales presentation etc. There is nothing, however, in such a purely quantitative measurement that will tell you whether or not the text, the ad and the talk were "good". A "good" instructional text is not necessarily a short one, the text to image ratio of an ad says nothing about how effective the ad may be, and a compressed talk will often leave the inquisitive listener unsatisfied.

In the last issue of Language at Work, the concept of quality was discussed and applied in a variety of different professional situations. Both in the article by Hanna Risku (pages 15-19) and in the Janus Head Article (pages 6-13), quality was viewed in relation to text production and management processes. In the article by Nyssa (pages 32-36) a new standard for the quality of a popular scientific magazine was discussed and in the article by Sørensen (pages 20-29) it was shown how the quality of communication played an important role during a merger process. In this article I would like to synthesize some of the many engaging thoughts on quality which were presented in the first issue of Language at Work. I will do so by presenting a holistic approach to what quality is and how we may optimize the quality of our daily communication.

But talking about quality is not something that is limited to the work place, let alone the last issue of Language at Work, on the contrary. We talk about quality in a number of different settings and on a daily basis, for example, the quality of life, water quality, quality time, quality management processes etc. And more often than not, we do so without really thinking about what is actually meant by that word "quality". In this article I will try to get a better grip of the concept behind the word and take a closer look at how we may improve the quality of our professional communication.

The Complex Nature of Communication Quality

Let us start by "going back to basics", in order to establish common ground when it comes to our understanding of quality. We can do so by contrasting the notion of quality with that of quantity. Quantity has to do with the measurable physical or material condition or character of something, i.e. the length, the breadth, the duration, or the weight etc. Quality on the other hand is an evaluation of the condition or character of something. In order for us not to get lost in the abstract world of concepts let us go on to apply these concepts unto practical communication.

When it comes to quantity, you can easily measure and quantify, say, the length of an instructional text, the number of words and images used in an ad, or the duration of a sales presentation. There is nothing, however, in such a purely quantitative measurement which will tell you whether or not the text, the ad and the talk were "good". A "good" instructional text is not necessarily a short one, the text-image ratio of an ad says nothing about how effective the ad may be, and a compressed talk will often leave the inquisitive listener unsatisfied. And this is in essence, why the concept of "good" communication quality is so elusive - because whether or not any piece of communication is of "good quality" depends not on mere measurement, but on interpretation.

A project group has isolated three dimensions which must all be taken into consideration when it comes to gauging communication quality from a pragmatic point of view, namely, the individual, the situational and the functional dimensions:

1. Individual (who is evaluating the text?)

The individual dimension has to do with "personal preferences & power". Due to your background, experience and training, you no doubt have quite an elaborate idea of what is considered "good" communication quality. But more often than not, your idea will differ from that of your colleagues on one point or another. And if you compare your idea of communication quality with that of an engineer, a lawyer or any other professional, you will most likely run into a whole array of differences. You may say: "Well that's their problem, since I'm the expert I know better". And you are probably right on both accounts, but in the (so-called) real-world, these other professionals may very well be your bosses, your readers, your customers or commissioners, which in turn make their personal preferences towards quality something you cannot overlook.

2. Situational (in what situation is the text to be used?)

The situational dimension has to do with "appropriateness". Even if you can say everything that you are able to say in many different ways, not all ways are appropriate in a given situation. What may be a sign of "good quality" in one situation (e.g. plain English when communicating legal matters to lay audiences), may very well be counterproductive and very likely perceived as patronizing in another (e.g. plain English when communicating legal matters to expert audiences).

3. Functional (for what purpose is the text to be used?)

The functional dimension has to do with whether or not a text will serve its purpose to the reader/listener/user. In a broad sense of the word, it has to do with "usability". If for instance, the reader's immediate reaction is what is called for, then the text, "In case of emergency dial 911", will serve its purpose. Whereas, a lengthy and rhetorical, beautifully composed text featuring elaborated argumentations giving every scrap of background information to the instruction will not - or at least not in time, that is.

What this boils down to is the realization, that there is no one way of measuring quality, therefore, no one quality - quality is what we may call a contingent concept. The answer to the question "Is this text of good quality?" must always take its point of departure in the statement "it depends".

Communication Quality ... Anything goes?

This realization that quality is dependent on the three dimensions (individual, situational and functional), means that quality is an extremely complex phenomenon to come to terms with. But even so, it doesn't mean that we have to give up talking about quality or give up trying to improve the quality of our communication. The ASB Research Group for Knowledge Communication, Denmark, has developed a theoretical framework, which takes into account the complex nature of quality, and at the same time lets you work in a very practical manner with improving the quality of your communication. Basically, the framework consists of three elements and each element is situated at a different level of communication work:

-a quality compass (what is my individual standpoint when it comes to communication quality?)

-a quality dialogue (what kind of situational and functional quality does a particular text require?)

-a quality matrix (how do I ensure standardized quality in similar assignments?)

As we shall see in the next paragraphs, the framework can be applied to systematically enhance the quality of professional communication on all three levels.

The Quality Compass

Like an ordinary magnetic compass, the quality compass will let you do two things: a) find your orientation point and b) give you a direction. When you orient yourself 'quality-wise', you find out what your standpoint is when it comes to quality. When you know where you stand 'quality-wise', you have a grounded basis to ask yourself whether or not you are satisfied with that standpoint. If you are not satisfied with your standpoint - with your current orientation - the compass is able to point out a new direction for you. The idea behind the compass is that you cannot change your perception of quality if you are not aware of it.
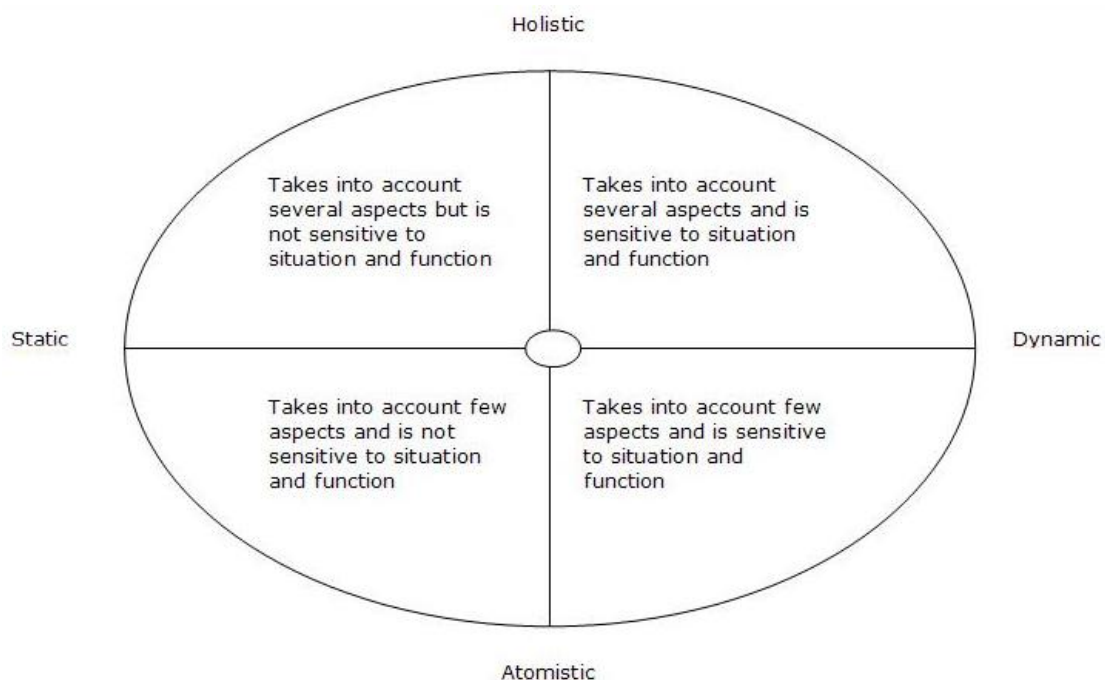
Fig. 1 The Quality Compass
The North-South axis of the quality compass is a scale going from "holistic-to-atomistic", and the East-West axis is a scale going from "static-to-dynamic".

Being 'holistic' or 'atomistic' indicates whether your communication process plays on only a few, or several strings, i.e. whether only a few and isolated quality parameters are applied (atomistic) when you communicate, or whether several integrated parameters are applied (holistic). If you have a purely atomistic approach to your quality work, your quality work will be done when you have dealt with only one single isolated phenomenon. For instance, used a spell-check, and that is it. If you have a purely holistic approach to quality work on the other hand, you use a spell-check naturally, but in addition to that, you take into account a myriad of other aspects such as genre conformity, the communicative potentials (and limits) of the medium in question, the adequacy of the style in the particular situation, the receptiveness of the audience, the requirements of the customer etc.

If your communication quality is primarily 'static', then the quality of your texts remains the same, irrespective of the situation in which the text should be applied and irrespective of its function. In other words, if you have a static point-of-view, text quality is not influenced by situational and functional factors at all. Whether you are writing an informal enquiry and emailing it to a long-time business associate or you are writing a million-Euro contract, there is but one quality. On the other hand, however, if your communication quality is primarily 'dynamic', then the assessment of the text quality changes in relation to the situation and the function of its intended use. From a purely dynamic point-of-view, the informal enquiry calls for a different kind of quality than the contract, e.g. the odd typo could be deemed justifiable in the email ("Well, she knows me, that doesn't matter, she'll get the idea."), but never in the contract.

No professional communicator, I take it, can be said to be purely one or the other. With all probability, all professional communicators are situated somewhere in between poles, somewhere along the scales. As a general rule though, today's communication theorists are advising that the quality standards of communicators and their companies should be situated in the upper right-hand corner of the compass - and consequently be holistic-dynamic.

Even if striving for the upper right-hand corner might not work for

you, or your company, it must at least be the professional duty of the communicator to be aware of his/her quality standpoint, because only then can s/he change that standpoint, if a change is wanted or required.

Two-Phased Quality Dialogue

Having determined where you (and/or your company) are situated on the compass is a prerequisite for the deliberate and systematic continuation of the quality-work on the next level - that of the text., the text being the primary tool of any communication professional. As is the case with any tool, the best result when using it is obtained if the user is a professional, and if the tool is designed to deal specifically with the task at hand. That is why the communicator's level of professional expertise is first and foremost judged by his/her ability to make very concrete quality decisions when it comes to text production. The two-phased dialogue (consisting of a generic and a specific interview guide) proposed in the next paragraphs, will help establish a systematic background for making such decisions.

Generic Interview Guide

The first step in the quality dialogue is the development of a generic interview guide in which the following quality-related questions are asked:

• Who is the commissioner and what is his/her idea of quality?
• Where is the text to be used? (at a garage, at an office, in an airplane etc.)
• Who is going to use it? (the mechanic, an accountant, children etc.)
• What is the purpose? (advertising, instructing, warning, teaching etc.)
• When is the deadline for completion? (two days, two months, two years etc.)

Even if the questions may seem almost mundane to the trained communicator, they are nevertheless the backbone of deliberate quality-work and quality-decisions. Naturally, these questions will not suffice when it comes to satisfying the communicator in the upper right-hand corner of the compass. It is the next step that is the real issue of the quality dialogue.

Assignment-Specific Interview Guide

Based on the generic interview guide, the communicator is now able to develop an assignment-specific interview guide centred on a relatively simple "if-so/then-so" structure. Based on the answers from the generic Wh-questions and his/her expertise, the communicator is now able to develop assignment-specific questions to the commissioner such as:

- "*If* your purpose with the text is x, *then* it has such and such consequences for the text"
- "*If* your audience of the text is y, *then* it means so and so to the text"
- "*If* your deadline is z, *then* the writing process will have to be done by then and then"
- Etc.

This part of the dialogue leads to the heart of the matter, namely, the follow-up question to be put to the commissioner:

- "Were you aware of that, and are you willing to accept that?"

In the ensuing discussion with the commissioner, you should be able to negotiate the kind of quality required to accomplish the communicative task at hand. In addition to carrying out such a dialogue, which may in itself have an eye-opening effect on the commissioner, the point is also to provide the commissioner with a sense of (co)ownership to the quality of the text, i.e. due to the (intentional) coaching-nature of the two-phased quality-dialogue, the commissioner can no longer distance him or herself from the quality of the text, since the commissioner has taken an active part in defining it. Even if such a dialogue may be difficult (due to impossible deadlines, unwilling commissioners, and the like), it is nevertheless, always the professional obligation of the communicator - at the very least - to problematize to the commissioner the quality of the text which is about to be produced.

The Quality Matrix

It is pairing the pieces of information extracted from the two-phased dialogue with your own quality standpoint (cf. the quality compass), that now allows you to develop a highly nuanced quality matrix. This will ensure that you have a systematic 'style sheet' allowing you to trim any text to meet exactly the quality needed in a given communicative setting.

The quality matrix, taking its starting point in the holistic-dynamic

perception of quality (as we have seen) is located in the upper right-hand corner of the compass.

Quality Criteria	Genres					
	X_1	X_2	$X_{3 \,(memo)}$ X_4		X_5	$X_{6 \,(contract)}$
Y_1	-	O	O ●		●	▲
Y_2	▲	●	- O		O	●
$Y_{3 \,(gender)}$	O	O	O O		O	●
Y_4	●	-	O ●		●	●
Y_5	▲	▲	● ●		-	●
$Y_{6 \,(signature)}$	O	O	- -		O	●

-: facultative, not important   O: obligatory, less important
▲: facultative, very important   ●: obligatory, very important

The Communication Quality Matrix

On the X-axis, you find the various professional text genres. It could be memos, contracts, enquiries, sales letters, etc. On the Y-axis, you find the criteria by means of which a quality assessment may be made. It could be orthographical, morphological, grammatical, semantic, text linguistic, pragmatic criteria, etc.

Synthesizing the Quality Framework

The use of the matrix can be illustrated via a scenario, and in doing so, the entire quality framework can be synthesized. Let us say that you, in your evaluation of your own quality standpoint (cf. the quality compass), came to the conclusion that you were, or wanted to be, in the uppermost right-hand corner and that you were, therefore, obligated to be holistic-dynamic. You are given two assignments by your boss and her deadline is short and firm: "Produce by tomorrow, a memo of the latest staff meeting and a contract to be signed with a new and promising customer." In the course of your quality dialogue with your boss, you have negotiated the quality standards which are to be met for the two assignments. These standards now form the basis for you input into the matrix.

X3 represents the memo, and X6 the contract. While these are both due tomorrow, the quality standards for the two texts are quite different. These differences are shown on the Y-axis. In order to illustrate, two criteria have been highlighted, namely, Y3 representing 'grammatical gender' and Y6 'a signature'. Obviously,

it is obligatory to choose the right grammatical gender for the words used in both the memo and the contract. At the same time, it is obviously more important to be grammatically correct in a contract than in a memo. The signature (Y6), however, is obligatory in the contract while it is facultative in a memo. Since quality is seen in relation to the situation and function, it also means that the same elements, in this case, grammatical gender and signature, do not play the same role in the assessment of quality in the two different genres. If the contract lacks the signature, it is per se disqualifying as a contract, whereas the absence of a signature on the memo will probably not impair the status of the memo. That is why the matrix operates with the two additional parameters, namely, whether the presence of a given element is facultative/obligatory and important/not important, respectively. Taking a step back, this means that being in the holistic-dynamic corner, the framework allows your text to show non-conformity with traditional rules in certain situations (i.e. grammatical gender and signature in the memo). Why? Because even if correctness is always a valid option, incorrectness at a certain level - for all practical purposes - carries little or no weight.

The real value of the matrix is twofold: Firstly (from a practical point-of-view), that you can tailor-make it to meet any kind of quality you need: E.g. an assignment-specific, a customer-specific, a genre-specific or a culture-specific matrix. And secondly (from a more abstract point-of-view), that the quality in question has been derived (and consequently so) all the way from the strategic level of the quality compass, over the tactical level of the quality dialogue to the operational production of the text.

Selling Out or Coming of Age?

One final question needs to be asked and answered after the above paragraph, and that question is: "Doesn't embracing such a pragmatic view of communication quality eventually lead to a sell-out of our professional integrity?" Personally, as well as professionally, I can say that I truly do not think so. In my view, it is a decisive step for our community to (professionally) come of age when it comes to how we deal with the issue of communication quality.

Peter Kastberg holds a Ph.D. in applied linguistics/technical communication, ar

Aarhus, Denmark. His current research interests include:

- - Mediating understanding between the expert and the non-expert,
- - personal knowledge management and
- - communication theory.

pk@asb.dk

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