

Losing the art of conversation

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Chitchat is taking over our lives to the extent that we are losing the ability to converse at length. Email, text and the omnipresent iPod have forced us into increasingly shorter exchanges, the consequences of which have an impact on our ability and willingness to tackle the major issues of the day.

New language research shows that conversations at work are becoming shorter, with more core business being conducted via email, telephone or video-link. Speed of communication takes precedence over extended debate or discussion. We now talk less about the weather and more about last night's television or the traffic jams on the way to work.

For Cambridge University Press's publication *Cambridge Grammar of English*, we used a 1 billion-word computer database of language to survey how words are being used in contemporary Britain and Ireland. The database, called the Cambridge International Corpus, holds recorded day-to-day conversations and examples from radio and TV across a wide range of different regions, age groups and social strata.

In a representative sample from the Corpus over 25% of everyday conversations among people at work involve changes in topic after just two or three speaking turns. This suggests that constantly introducing new topics or ideas is a preferred mode of sustaining a discussion. This is also reflected in education, where increasing class sizes in school, college and university lead to an inevitable reduction in time and opportunities for learning how to put your point of view across.

The reasons behind all this small-talk communication are highly significant: it is part of the social glue that keeps us all in touch. It is vital in forming and sustaining relationships within our fast-paced modern world. But it also begs the question how well do we do big talk?

Big talk means discussing ideas in depth, having your ideas and thoughts challenged so you get to refine them more, forcing you to re-think, extend and elaborate your first thoughts. It means listening intently; in face-to-face discussion it means learning to recognise and better interpret body language, nods of the head, raised eyebrows, telling smiles.

Considering that art reflects life, we need only watch an episode of *Eastenders* to see that we are seriously in danger of losing our ability to debate. The neat sound bite has been extended to the 20-second sequence on our favourite primetime shows. Even *Parkinson*, which used to have a single guest with careful follow-up questions and gentle interrogation of key ideas, now has so many guests to squeeze in. And the few existing discussion based programmes such as *Newsnight* and *Question Time* have been relegated to the late hours at night.

But in a democratic society, it is vital that we become a nation on receive as well as transmit. If we lose the art of conversation, there is a risk that we may become inflexible and stereotyped in our thinking, a little self-righteous perhaps. If nobody challenges us, then we end up only agreeing with ourselves. How democratic is that?

More pressingly, there are discussions going on now in which we all must engage at length – life-threatening issues like climate change, political upheaval and the increasing natural disaster. It is essential that the public have the tools to take part in these discussions. Losing the ability to have extended conversations on big topics will hinder our chances of coming up with the solutions.

On the bright side, there are signs that people want to rediscover the art of debate. The rise in Reading Groups, where people meet to discuss books with universal themes or big ideas, is taking place all around the country. There is also the possibility that the technology which services and controls our ever more frantic lives – and that forces us into short exchanges – will begin to offer solutions. With the arrival of the videophone not too far off, perhaps we will be forced into re-learning something of the art of conversation.

Tips for conversationalists

- Conversation is a two-way process. Don't talk about yourself or just give your own ideas about things. Ask others directly for their views and listen to what they say.
- Show interest in what others have to say. Remember personal details about them. Be a good listener and give positive feedback to what people say. Ask follow-up questions. Try to re-cycle their words in your speaking to show that you've heard what they've said.
- Learn how to alternate between talking and listening. Make sure your speaking turns are not too long or elaborate or repetitive.

- Conversations are visual too. Be aware of body language. Make good eye-contact and at appropriate points nod supportively – even if you disagree.
A friendly smile and tactful humour help conversation to flow.
- Make a mental note of things of interest that can be used to start a conversation. Current and local issues, sport, recent events and the activities of others (public figures, celebs) will always make good conversation topics whether at home or at the office.
- Beware of telling too many personal anecdotes. Always try to give examples that lead you to general conclusions.
- Don't keep changing the topic. It is better to pursue one or two topics than to keep trying to juggle too many subjects. Don't be afraid of shortish silences. They can allow people thinking time.
- Be polite at all times. Do not interrupt others too much when they are speaking. However, when you feel comfortable in a conversation, interrupt calmly and in a friendly way to challenge an idea or point of view. Conversation becomes debate when ideas are challenged.