

Regional

Schaefer works to facilitate better communication

Communication between people is obviously at the core of human behavior, affecting everyday life. Whether at work, with family, with friends or strangers, what we say and do and how it is perceived is key to our understanding of how the world works and of our place in it. Interpersonal communication, as taught at the university level, involves the study of one-on-one human communication or communication between the individual and society. Among today's college students, a popular way of communicating with society is through the use of an old and somewhat stigmatized form of communication—the tattoo.

"The first formal research paper that I ever wrote as an undergraduate was on the very notion of the changing stigmas and notions and stories that a single tattoo tells. It was based on my own personal experience of getting a tattoo," said Zachary Schaefer, an assistant professor in the department of speech communication at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "Being a person at the time in high school who came from a conservative family, it's true that my parents were not happy. So that's where the idea for the research came from and what I found is that it is just changing the cultural norms and then, of course, the media get involved."

Born in Belleville, Ill., Schaefer obtained his bachelor's degree in communication from St. Louis University, his master's degree in organizational communication, also from St. Louis University, and his doctorate in communication from Texas A&M University. He said that he sees society's acceptance of tattoos as an evolution.

"We can see a rapid expansion of acceptance," Schaefer said. "I can't even count how many tattoo shows there are nowadays, so with the commercialization and the sort of cultural commodification of them, tattoos have become much more accepted." Still, he added, while visible



SIUE Photo by Kizzy Schaefer

Professor Zachary Schaefer, standing, with one of his students.

tattoos seem almost expected for people in the entertainment industry, they are still not expected on people in professional positions, such as doctors and lawyers.

"You generally don't see them on the back of the hand, on the face or neck," he said of tattoos on people in these professions. "Still, their image has moved away from the drunken sailor, prostitute stereotype and into mainstream culture." Questions of who can and still cannot wear visible tattoos lead to issues of personal conflicts and their resolution, which was the topic of Schaefer's doctoral dissertation.

"Many people unfortunately hear the word conflict and immediately get tense and develop a feeling of apprehension. The word has a very negative connotation, but conflict is absolutely built into human DNA," he said. "What I try to do, both in my research and personal life, is to help or teach people to just manage that disagreement more effectively." In addition to interpersonal communication, Schaefer also teaches courses in public speaking, the very name of which strikes fear in many.

"For me, it is all about the context," he explained. "People create this barrier, obstacle, probably a perception in their heads that is more formalized than it really occurs in natural life. People are typically really good public speakers. We do it all day. But when you need to give a speech, then all of a sudden something changes psychologically and the fear starts to creep in."

Fear or no fear, Schaefer said that among the skills most sought after by employers these days – regardless of type of job – is the ability to communicate. So how well are colleges and universities teaching those skills to their students?

"I think we do a pretty good job, but I think we can do a better job," said Schaefer. "I think one thing that I try to do in my classes is to connect students

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

with some real world organizations to get some of the skills, and it is a mutually beneficial relationship. Employers say they want people with strong communication skills, strong leadership skills, team skills, know how to write well and give presentations. What we as professors of communication need to do is connect our students to alumni who have these kinds of jobs. Then the students get to see what is expected." But what is the reaction of students once they realize they need to learn these communication skills in order to be successful in life?

"Especially at the lower level classes, and this is at every university I have ever taught, is that students come with that myth that communication is just common sense," Schaefer said. "Well ok, if this is so easy then why do we have disagreements, strife and troubles?" he said he asks his students. "Once they start to see how and why you can communicate, connect and share, I think they really start to appreciate it. We don't have a formula for communication like they do in science or in math, but that's what makes you a critical thinker. You take the time to step back." Schaefer's latest research is focused on how very successful people use communication-related skills.

"I am interested in big people with big ideas, specifically entrepreneurs," Schaefer said. "One of my current projects is looking at how they think about creativity and how they respond to failure."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.