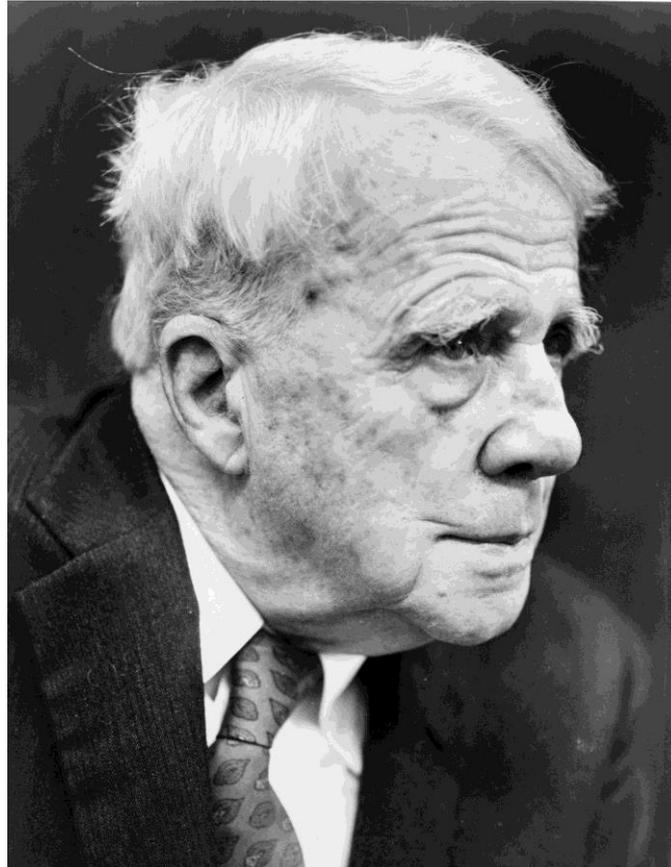


**Using Robert Frost's *Mending Wall* to Teach
Overcoming Barriers to Communication**

Dr. Deepa Sethi, Ph.D.



Robert Frost 1864-1963

Courtesy: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robert_Frost_NYWTS_4.jpg

Importance of Communication and Communication Skills

Communication is the heartbeat of every relationship. It is the very pivot around which our relationship with the various stakeholders of our life revolves. While it is the lifeblood of every organization, it is also the essence of a family. Considering the mammoth worth of communication, we still have a hope. We are all born communicators. When an infant is born, it makes a sound (in lay man's terms, cries) and that communicates the arrival of a new member, a new life. On the other hand, when a person dies, there is silence, and this silence communicates the departure of a member, a life. Throughout our journey on this planet called Earth, we are in the enduring process of polishing our already-inherent communication skills.

On Defining Communication

Several experts and scholars have given different definitions of Communication. While Keith Davis (1967) states that communication facilitates the transfer of information and understanding from one individual to another, another scholar Louis A. Allen (1958) defines Communication as everything that an individual does, when he wishes to develop an understanding in another individual's mind. It is an ongoing process of combining speaking, listening, and comprehending. However, in a common person's words, "Communication is to get the desired outcome." In order to reach this goal, each one of us experiments with words and tone, and eventually achieves it. However, the process of communication comes with roadblocks, which are termed as barriers to communication.

Types of Barriers to Communication

The types of barriers to communication are: physical/environmental barriers, psychological barriers, technological barriers, cultural barriers, organizational barriers and so on and so forth. These barriers may be at the sender's end, receiver's end, or in the transmission process. These barriers may hinder the very process of communication by either causing distractions or problems, leading to distortion in comprehension. It is very important to identify the barriers to communication, and fix them in order to attain the desired outcome, as stated earlier. Two major barriers to communication: physical and psychological barriers will be discussed in the present article.

Physical Barriers

These are also called environmental barriers as they can be easily observed and noticed. These include: walls, closed doors, distance, time zone, temperature, noise etc.

Psychological Barriers

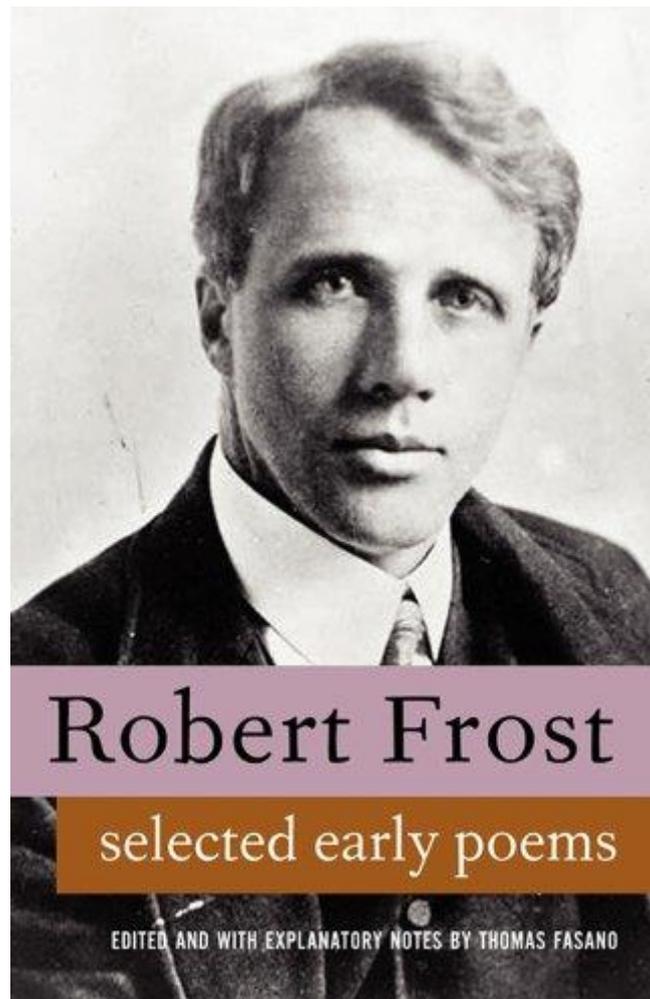
Barriers due to which communication is distorted due to the problems related to human psychology issues. These include: emotions attitudes, opinions, judgement, pre-conceived notions, presumptions, indifference, closed mind, anger, pride, anxiety, rigid thoughts etc. These are very complex as they are related to the human mind.

Overcoming Barriers

This module on barriers to communication can be instructed in different ways: examples from personal and corporate life, movie screenings, role plays, case studies, powerpoint presentations, lecture mode etc. However, the students today are always seeking change, they are engaged when new and innovative pedagogies are employed in the learning process.

Use of Poetry

This article proposes the use of poetry in teaching barriers to communication. The poem, "**Mending Wall**" provides succinct examples of physical and psychological barriers to communication.



Mending Wall

Composed by the American poet, Robert Frost, the poem “Mending Wall” is the opening poem of his second collection of poetry titled *North of Boston*, published in 1914. Like most of the poems in this collection, “Mending Wall” narrates a story in rural New England. It talks about a fence that is re-constructed every spring between the properties of two New England farmers. They wonder how the wall is broken every year.

In lines 1–4, the poet reflects on the fact that there is something in the environment that breaks down the wall every interval of time. It might be the underground water that gets frozen in winter and the ice formed therefore expands thereby causing cracks in the wall, as a result of which the boulders topple down. Gradually the crack becomes wide enough for two people to cross together through it. These lines talk about the physical barrier that hinders the two neighbours to communicate. It is the wall which is visible. Likewise, our communication is shadowed by different physical barriers like: noise, distance, temperature etc which cause trouble in communication.

In lines 5–11, the poet refuses to accept that the wall might be broken by hunters. He had re-organized the boulders after the hunters made changes for the rabbits to come out of their burrows. Nonetheless, the gaps which were visible now in the wall seemed mysterious. Sometimes, the physical walls are a result of our mental blocks, resulting out of our ego and pre-conceived notions and biases, and there is a human urge to be confined within our

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **18:4 April 2018**

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boundaries; however something or the other often leads to the dismantling of these walls we create around ourselves.

Lines 12 – 19 are about the description of the wall which stands between two pieces of land made apart by a hill. The poet has informed his neighbour about the hole; and they have mutually decided a day to examine the damage. Having done so, the two farmers decide to reinstate the boulders on their individual side, although it is complex work because of the varying size and shape of the stones. They believe only a miracle can keep them in place. This stands true in our communication as well. We love to work in silos. However the workplace responsibilities, on some account or the other, bring us face to face with people we despise and have created distance from them, for a deliberation to decide on organizational tasks.

In lines 20 – 29, the poet says that the hands of both of them, his neighbour and himself, are cold and tired due to picking up the heavy stones. The entire exercise seems absurd and play-like since the wall is not required at all because the two of them have a different plantation. While the poet produces apples, his neighbour nurtures pine trees. The poet further says that his apple trees will never cross their land to eat the pine from his trees. However, the neighbour is sceptical. He believes that good fences make good neighbours. The poet does not stop his efforts of convincing the neighbour in spring again.

Psychological Barrier

There is a clear psychological barrier to communication in these lines. A pre-conceived notion of the neighbour regarding the purpose of walls hinders him to break through the fences even though the poet insists him to do so. One's presumptions and subjective judgement often creates psychological barriers between one and one's receivers: listeners or readers. One finds it secure to live in one's comfort zone whether it is the personal work space or one's individual thought-process. Hence, one finds difficulty in aligning individual goals to organizational goals.

Ties That Prevent Us from Getting Close to People

The poet questions his neighbour in lines 30 – 41 regarding why he feels good fences make good neighbours. There is neither greenery nor cows to feed on them on the fences. The poet is at a loss to understand what the neighbour is trying to protect by restoring the wall. He wonders that the wall is brought down by elves. The neighbour appears to him as a crude and unrefined stone-age dweller, and for whom the boulders are his weapons. These lines further the notion of psychological barriers to communication. There are certain beliefs that keep us tied and prevent us from getting close to people, these beliefs make us distrust every other person in our surroundings and thereby affect our communication pattern with the person. Finally in lines 42 – 46, the poet feels that his neighbour, the other farmer, has a close bond with darkness. It is not only the darkness by the shade of the trees, it is also the darkness resulting from his own closed view of the world and his inability to deviate from his father's view that good fences make good neighbours. At times, we fail to communicate because of our inhibitions, thereby straining our relationships at work and at home as well.

To Conclude

In conclusion, it can be said that students learn and retain better the barriers to communication by appreciating the two farmers' story in the poem, "Mending Wall." The lesson learnt is that communication is never a monologue. In order to communicate

effectively, one needs to develop active listening skills. One also needs to remember that the doors of communication should never be closed. And to achieve all this, one needs to understand and overcome the barriers to communication.

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