

Communication

Good communication skills are essential to successful teaching. Especially when dealing with adults, as we have seen adult teaching is very much a two-way street so you must be good at understanding others and expressing yourself to successfully convey information.

This document explores:

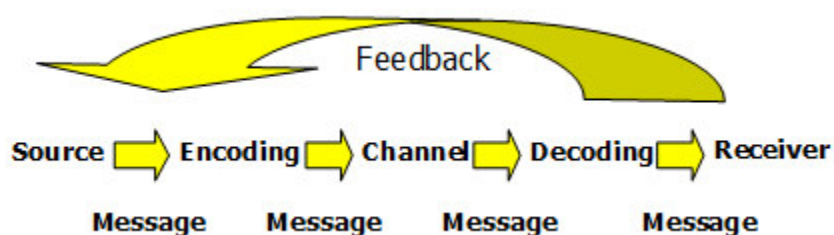
- How to communicate effectively in one-to-one and one-to-many discussions
- Noticing when communication is at risk of breaking down and help towards avoiding it
- How to provide constructive feedback without being critical

What is communication?

Communication is the transfer and receipt of information from one person to another (or from one point to another). It is always between at least two people – sender and receiver – and the roles will change frequently.

The most important thing to remember about communication is that it stops with understanding not delivery. The message must be understood by the receiver for communication to be considered complete.

The Communication Process



There are 4 key elements of communication these are:

The Method:

- Verbal
- Non-verbal
- Written

The Receiver:

- Could be known or unknown
- Sender must imagine being the receiver

The Situation:

- Distance
- Speed
- Attitude
- Different

Nature of Content:

- Must be clear and understandable
- Unacceptable content should be avoided

Common hindrances to effective communication:

Personal:

- Attitude of both the sender and the receiver

- Misuse of body language (see facilitation document)
- Pre-judgement by the communicator or receiver.
- The "I have heard it all before" syndrome
- Emotional reactions
- Mis-communication (intentional or unintentional)

These are the most easily overcome. Communicators can influence them and prevent them from occurring through attentive communication and self awareness. Think carefully before expressing yourself about how it could be misconstrued or who it could offend.

Thoughtless communication can cause *Defensiveness* – when individuals interpret another's message as threatening, they often respond in ways that retard effective communication. Think carefully about the language that you use – even within a language words can mean different things to different people.

Avoid *Filtering* when the sender manipulates information so that it will be seen more favorably by the receiver, although this may make the situation more pleasant it will prevent true communication from occurring.

Be aware of *Selective Perception* where the receiver selectively sees and hears based on his/her needs, motivations, experiences, background and other personal characteristics.

Situational:

- Improper timing
- Noise and distractions in the environment
- Pressure of time or other demands
- Unfamiliar language
- Knowledge Level

These are more difficult to control. Careful forward planning and thoughtful consideration can help

Inclusive language

Language is important in shaping and portraying perceptions and attitudes, and is by no means neutral.

- Choosing certain words can exclude and devalue people.
- Choosing appropriate words allows us to treat each other with dignity, respect and sensitivity.

Gender neutral language

- Use gender-free terms in writing or talking about traditionally male or female activities.
- Let language usage reflect the fact that both men and women are involved.

Disabilities

Unless your teaching is specifically focused on disabilities, avoid singling out ones with disabilities simply for the sake of identification.

- Avoid words that imply victimisation or create negative stereotypes (e.g., "victim" or "sufferer" for someone with a disease).
- Avoid words such as "poor," "unfortunate" or "afflicted."

Pronouns

Avoid the pronoun **he** when both sexes are included. Alternative approaches are:

- Recast the plural.
- Reword to eliminate the pronoun.
- Replace the masculine pronoun with **one, you,** or (sparingly) **he or she** as appropriate.

- Use a plural indefinite pronoun (e.g. "All those who are on the course should bring their notes with them tomorrow.")

Speaking skills

Don't totally control conversation acknowledge what has been said and incorporate it into your discourse. This will help people relate to and personalize what you are saying which is essential for keeping them interested and getting them to understand.

Ask for other's views or suggestions- if people are not offering comments, bring them into the discourse. As seen previously involvement is essential to successful adult learning.

State your position openly

- Be specific, not global, make your point as your own
- Be clear in what you are saying but not damning of other opinions
- Be validating, not invalidating (never say "You wouldn't understand")
- Acknowledge other's uniqueness, importance.

Don't react to emotional words, interpret their purpose

- Important not to allow personal feelings to derail the focus of the discussion.
- Respond in a way that acknowledges the emotion but eliminates it from the topic.

Listening skills

Listening holds as much importance and responsibility as speaking and should be pursued actively.

Good listening promotes good understanding of other's points. It will also help you to understand how your own points are being perceived, therefore making it easier to ensure that you are well understood in the group. Most of all it will promote good relationships between you and your students which is essential for successful teaching and will make your work much more enjoyable.

Active listening

Empathising and identifying with the speaker

- Will help you to understand their points better, faster, as a whole; you will better grasp the entire issue.
- Allow you to put your own points in a way which is attainable and poignant to the listener.

Be responsive

- Maintain a high level of eye contact.
- Use body language to show interest and openness.
- Show your understanding using paraphrasing and short utterances BUT be careful to encourage not interrupt.

Listen and understand all points being made

- Listen openly to the other person
- Make sure you understand the point and the point of view before you form an opinion

- Judge the content, not the messenger or delivery
- Ask the other person for as much detail as he/she can provide

Listening between the lines

- Pay attention to verbal and nonverbal cues about how the speaker feels about their points
- Understanding the speaker's feelings will allow you to respond sensitively and avoid problems such as defensiveness.

Pay attention

- Fight distractions, especially thinking ahead to what you are going to say back! If you have not listened your retort may not be relevant.

Testing for understanding (Feedback)

- Do not make assumptions –ask questions to verify your understanding.
- Use multiple techniques to fully comprehend
- Ask open friendly questions such as "If I have understood correctly you are saying that...?"
- Ask them to repeat themselves if necessary
- Ask them to rephrase things if you feel you are misunderstanding

Constructive feedback

Providing constructive feedback is a key part of training. Receiving it is key to the learning process, if you never tell students about the progress they are making they will think they have not made any. Feedback also gives you a chance to delve into things students are doing which you feel are hindering learning- for themselves or the group.

Never give feedback without carefully planning what you are going to say, badly given feedback can be hurtful to the person and harmful to the learning process. Decide whether you want to give feedback to the group as a whole or individually. Depending on the content, decide whether you want to give individual feedback one on one or in front of the group- the group might learn a lot hearing what you have to say to each person but if you think it might embarrass the receiver then it would be counter productive. You can involve the group in this decision; ask them what they would prefer and abide by their requests.

When giving feedback think about two the principles of adult learning:

- Autonomous, participants make decisions for themselves; you are there to guide not tell them.
- Experience, participants' past experience has provided them with a strong sense of self. They know more about themselves than you do.

Here are a few simple rules to follow when giving feedback

It must not be focused on the person

- Avoid accusations
- Focus on the behavior/message not the person.
- ... and behavior which the receiver can do something about..

It must be presented as your opinion

- Leaves individual free to use it or not to use it
- It must not be evaluative - cause defensiveness.
- Be descriptive about the action, message and how you perceived it.

It must always be solution orientated

- Never provide critical feedback for the sake of criticizing
- Must be for improvements sake
- Must include possible solutions and alternatives - which must in turn be open to criticism.

It must include praise

- Points that impressed you as well as those that did not.
- By pointing these out you reinforce what you want from them by showing them which path to follow.

It must be well focused and clear

- Be as specific and detailed as possible
- Be completely clear before you start
- Misunderstandings and generalisations during feedback can be damaging

It must be benefit the receiver (not the giver)

- Given to help, not to hurt. Feedback is not to make us feel better or give a psychological advantage.
- Must be an amount of information that the receiver can use. Overload will reduce the possibility that receiver can use what he receives effectively.

It must be appropriately timed

- Feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good.
- If time has past need to rethink whether you need to give the feedback. It is only to help the recipient and they may now have helped themselves.

It must not be presumptuous

- It concerns what is said and done, or how, not why.

Think of feedback as sharing of information rather than giving advice. It is part of the communication process. It can not start until you fully understand the point you are providing feedback on. It is not finished until they understand what you are explaining to them. It does not finish with your inputs; your feedback must be open to further feedback.

Getting feedback

It is equally important for you to get feedback on your lessons. Ask honestly what student thought of the lesson, information and exercises. Because they have not been told how to give good feedback you must be stronger than you expect them to be. Accept the criticism without defensiveness and without taking it personally, look for the constructive message within it. If you can not see one ask what they mean and how they feel you should solve the problem they have identified, DO NOT accuse them of being unjustified simply request clarification.

There will be some things which you can not solve, things which necessitate more funding may not be within your power to resolve, in these cases explain transparently your position. Do not ignore them.

Make note of the constructive criticisms from feedback you have been given and follow up on it. After attempting to resolve an issue ask them if they feel there has been an improvement.

Involving them in the teaching will make your job easier. You should not feel as though you are bending over backwards to accommodate them, you are just taking the guess work out of your teaching. This is one of the luxuries of teaching adults- they know how they feel and what they like, and can express it. The happier they are the easier your job will be and the more learning will take place.