

Introduction to Communication

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Training Communication Skills in the Context of University Teaching

Our private and professional lives are full of communicative challenges. These challenges are multifaceted and range from obtaining information from a government agency, apologising to the teacher for being absent, introducing oneself to a new group, giving a lecture at college, resolving a conflict with a friend, conducting a job interview, to testifying in court or describing one's symptoms to the doctor.

Some of these challenges we handle with ease, while we might be struggling with others even in adult life. In professional contexts interpersonal skills have become increasingly important within the past five decades (OECD, n.d., p.10). Therefore, corresponding skills are important resources – both privately and professionally – and their structured and didactic sound teaching should be given high priority in all educational institutions.

This Book is intended to help you integrate aspects of communication training into university teaching. On the one hand, it should give you the opportunity to observe yourself in your communication and to get to know the corresponding theoretical background. On the other hand, it offers the tools to give students the space to train basic communication skills. All methods and exercises are selected in such a way that they require as little preparation as possible and, in the best case, can be integrated into existing parts of the curriculum.



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How Does Communication Work?

If we look back in our communication biographies, we often remember particularly well the moments when communication did not work. Whether in private or in professional life, misunderstandings, conflicts, and confusions remain in our memory. In situations where communication works smoothly, it is usually not even noticed. In order to understand how communication works (whether well or badly), it is worthwhile to look at communication theory models, such as Paul Watzlawick's Five Axioms of Communication.

Paul Watzlawick's Five Axioms of Communication

1. One cannot *not* communicate.

The first axiom shows that everything that one does or does not is a message. Let us take a situation in a waiting room, for example. In the waiting room, one person is already sitting and looking out of the window when a second person enters. The first person does not react, but continues to look out of the window. And although she may not be actively or consciously communicating at that moment, she is still sending a message to her counterpart. How this is interpreted depends on the other person:

- "I don't feel like talking."
- "I can't talk."
- "I don't want to be disturbed."

"Activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot *not* respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 1)

In the same way, the reaction to it also contains a message: the person, having just entered, can leave the room again, he can say "Hello" loudly, he can sit down silently on a chair and also look out of the window. He cannot *not* react.

Experiment

Whether in the cafeteria or at home in the dining room - try not to communicate for once. Preferably try this with someone you know, and exchange views on the situation afterwards. The prerequisite is that both parties are aware of the presence of the other.

2. There are both content and relationship levels of communication

The content level of communication contains all information.

The relationship statements are about one or several of the following assertions:

- "This is how I see myself."
- "This is how I see you."
- "This is how I see you seeing me."

The relationship level therefore determines "how this communication is to be taken" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 3). This relationship information is expressed through facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc. The relationship aspect is always above the content aspect and influences it. If there is a negative relationship, the communication on the content level is often disturbed and not constructive. For example,

- Two people in a seminar group do not like each other. One of them always devalues the other's contributions to the discussion.
- A new working group needs time to get to know each other and build a relationship.

Uncertainties in the relationship always influence the factual level and thus the work. Working on the relationship level can, we know from experience, sometimes be more difficult and sometimes easier. Often it is easier with people who are similar to us in certain respects, with whom we can possibly also be friends in private. Especially in intercultural groups, this work on the relationship level takes on a special meaning, because you cannot take things for granted.

3. The nature of a relationship is dependent on the punctuation of the partners' communication procedures.

The third axiom is introduced with two examples:

The teacher is strict with the class because the students hardly cooperate actively. The students hardly ever speak up because the teacher is so strict.



"I don't trust you because you don't talk to me about your feelings."

"I only talk about my feelings with people who do not trust me."

Communication is always stimulus **and** response. But participants punctuate their communicative contributions differently - they always see themselves reacting to something.



I am moving back because you are nagging all the time. If you would keep talking to me and not withdraw, I wouldn't nag you. A classic vicious circle in everyday communication.

The causal connection is experienced completely differently as everyone has their subjective perception of the situation. In the end the actual starting point cannot be determined anymore

4. Communication can be both digital and analogue

The fourth axiom sounds more complicated than it is. By digital means, we mean speech. Analogue, on the other hand, refers to all non-verbal or para-verbal means, such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, and melody. Language is used to convey information clearly and with little room for interpretation. Here we are again at the factual level of Axiom 2. Non-verbally, on the other hand, communication takes place between the lines - primarily about the relationship.

Example

You can say the sentence „Wow, you did a great job!“ spontaneously in five completely different ways and with five completely different attitudes using the exact same words - but differences with facial expressions, gestures or vocal means.

6. Communication is either symmetrical or complimentary

Communication is complimentary in situations in which the parties involved are not equal but one party has the power of the situation. Situations in which the participants meet at eye level are symmetrical.

Especially in a professional or university context, conversational situations are often complementary.

Example

Who is right now in the example above (from the perspective of constructivist didactics)?

Everyone constructs their own reality, e.g. the nagging person and the one who tries to escape, as an example. Neither is wrong. They both have their perception of reality - their reality. Arguing about it usually does not lead to a solution. Why should either of them admit that they are wrong when they are not?

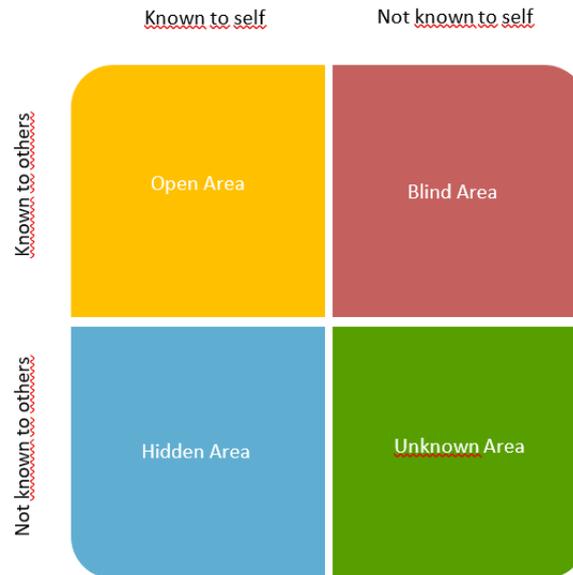
The root of many everyday conflicts and misunderstandings can be found - viewed from the outside - in these axioms. However, if you are in the middle of it, it sometimes takes some effort and self-reflection, perspective-taking and even more communication to understand which mechanisms influence the situation - especially in emotional moments.



How to Learn and Develop Communication? Giving Feedback

1. Johari Window Model

The Johari Window Model (Luft & Ingham, 1955) shows where the development of communicative competence can start. The model represents the conscious and unconscious parts of communication. The four quadrants span the dimensions "known/unknown to me" and "known/unknown to others".



The Johari Window Model by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (1955)

The **Open Area** includes everything that I consciously communicate to others. For example: *The teacher tells the students that the seminar has to end 10 minutes earlier today.*

The **Hidden Area**, on the other hand, includes information that I am aware of but do not share with others. This information often concerns our private person. For example: *The teacher does not tell the group that the reason is that his child is sick and needs to be picked up earlier from daycare.*

Everything that is known about us to others but not to ourselves is in the **Blind Area**. In our example, this includes the fact that *the teacher speaks faster than usual and keeps tugging at his beard*. These are also communicated signs that are perceived by the group - the teacher, however, is completely unaware of them.

The **Unknown Area**, includes everything that neither I nor the others are aware of. This might sound a little mystical as it could be anything: Reasons for certain behaviours that even we are not aware of, include for example the fact that they go far back into our childhood or because they are repressed. However, this area plays a less important role in communication training. This area is usually dealt with in the context of psychological counselling.

„I don't know what I said, until I got the answer of my counterpart.“
(Paul Watzlawick)

Rhetorical education primarily addresses the two upper quadrants: the **Open** and the **Blind Area**. The goal is to make the Open Area as large as possible through self-observation and reflection - by making the blind spot smaller and smaller and becoming aware of unconscious behaviours:

- When he is distracted, he tugs at his sleeve.
- When I am excited, I start talking faster.
- When I am teaching in front of a group, I rarely smile.
- A lecturer looks mainly at his hands.

The basic method for this development is feedback. By receiving feedback, one gets insight into (communicative) behaviours that were previously hidden in the blind spot.



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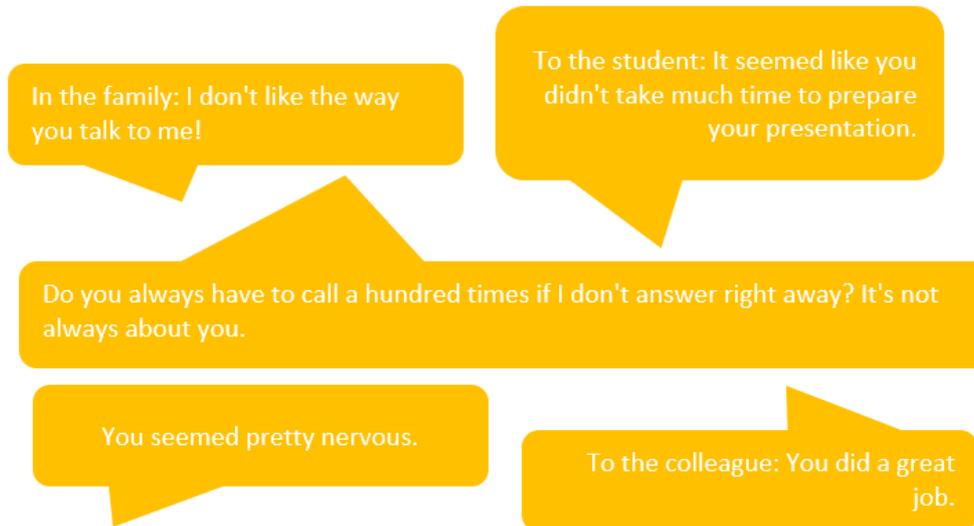
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Since everyone has his or her own perception of reality, I cannot rely on what I want to say is actually reaching my counterpart in the intended way. Feedback can help to overcome this uncertainty and contributes greatly to the further development of communicative and social competence.

2. Self-experiment for teachers

2.1. Observe yourself in everyday life

- When do you give people feedback?
- How do you give people feedback?



These reactions have their justification. You have the need to communicate yourself to the other person. Let us take these reactions as a raw form of feedback. Because, as we all know, not everything (by far not everything!) that comes to mind at first is constructive feedback. So let us take this raw feedback and find out what is behind it.

2.2 Which perception is the reason for the feedback?



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Think about what specific situation led to this feedback. Describe it as precisely as possible - only for yourself.

Didactic note: Consider whether the perception can be "photographed". This way you avoid descriptions that are already biased by your opinion or interpretative (e.g. you smiled all the time as if something was unpleasant for you).

2.3. How did this perception affect you?





Try to really stay with yourself here and describe your feelings and inner reactions. Don't be surprised. This is not easy. You can be affected in different ways: excited, carried away, amazed, annoyed, confused, entertained, bored.

2.4. What role do my feelings play here?

Verbalising feelings is particularly important in private conflict situations. Often the feelings emphasise the relevance of the issue. See example 1 ("I don't like the way you talk to me!"). Expressing the feelings can make it clear to the daughter that this is not just a matter of parenting or a power play. A parent is actually affected or hurt by my behaviour. This can be real a turning point in such moments.

Giving Feedback is about

- **Perception** ("What exactly triggered this? What did you hear or see?")
- **The Impact on me** ("Which emotions and reactions did this cause?")

2.5. Take it or leave it

The advantage of this kind of feedback is that everyone can take away what they need. Whether the feedback is valuable to the person or not is for them alone to decide. In example situation 1, it is possible that the daughter intended exactly this effect. The example shows that a distinction between positive and negative feedback does not work: What is negative for me as a listener may well be positive for the speaker. In example situation 4, the student may decide in retrospect that he was simply in a bad mood that day because he still had an exam to take. He may know that on any other day he would have spoken much more slowly and not give much importance to the feedback.

2.6. The result

Giving feedback aims at letting the recipient know exactly where he or she stands. He or she knows which specific behaviours have caused which effect - no matter whether positive or negative. He or she can decide to change something in the future or to do it again in exactly the same way. He or she is completely free in this decision.

2.7. Caution: Not everything that is called feedback is feedback!

In the university context, it is our job to evaluate. Exams, tests, assignments - in the end it is all about grades. Here it is particularly important to distinguish when it is really about feedback (about personal development) and when is it about a grade or credit points.

The fundamental difference is that feedback by its very nature is subjective and grades should be objective. Emotions



or our personal opinion should not play a role here.

Evaluation = Comparison of what should be and what is on the basis of predefined criteria.
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Feedback = Description of a fact or behaviour and the emotion or reaction it has triggered in me.

Both are difficult to combine in one process, as for the students the final grade will always dominate everything said. For example, if a presentation has to be graded, feedback can only be an add-on. If you want to introduce feedback in a graded presentation, it should be made transparent in advance what exactly will be assessed (What criteria and standards will be used?) If the group also gives feedback, this should not be included in the grade. Announce this in advance, because the pre-assumption can change the whole feedback of the group: either to a particularly harsh or a particularly gentle feedback - either way it is of no use to the recipient and can even do harm.



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How to Teach Communication?

Communication is social behaviour. Therefore, communication cannot be taught by merely learning concepts and practicing methods, but always goes hand in hand with personal development (Meyer, 2013, p. 146). Personal development, in turn, requires a supportive learning environment and a particular approach to delivery by the instructor. Several factors influence such learning situations and are worth being considered in advance.

Factors influencing the teaching of communication skills

1. Humanistic image of man

"Unfortunately, teachers very often forget that they are the most important learning condition." (Reich, 2008, p. 232)

This principle relates to teachers' attitudes toward both their content and their learners. Factors such as treating students with appreciation, patience, respect, composure, the ability to deal with conflict, and an open and sincere interest in their development are conducive to the teaching situations discussed here. They also include a belief that every student is capable of learning and developing communication skills.

2. Altruistic Egoism

This principle refers to your well-being as a teacher and the conviction that you can only be available to the learners with all your resources, whether cognitive, emotional or social, if you yourself are doing well. For this, you must also perceive and acknowledge your personal, needs and fears - especially in teaching.

3. Connectivity

We have been communicating since we were little children. When teaching communication, especially for adults, it is always possible to draw on prior knowledge in the group. Therefore, it makes sense, on the one hand, to get as accurate a picture as possible of the needs and previous experiences of the participants. On the other hand, it is advisable to remain in methodical exchange with the group during the process, to ask for their own experiences on the topic, to use these experiences for work and to provide space for discussion.

4. Viability and practical relevance

Sustainable teaching of skills requires that they are seen by participants as viable, relevant and useful in practice. What is not recognised as functional will not be internalised and ultimately not applied. Learning success is more likely if the topics covered are either asked for and desired by the participants themselves or if the instructor starts by demonstrating their relevance for practice and as close to everyday life as possible. When it comes to conflict management, for example, it makes sense to discuss concrete situations from the students' everyday lives. This makes the forms conflicts can take tangible. In addition, concrete approaches to solutions can be directly tested for their feasibility.

5. Crossing perspectives

Meyer (2013, p. 149) vividly highlights how different our views and perspectives on things are: Teachers have different perspectives than students. Scientists have different perspectives than philosophers. Senior people have different perspectives than young people. These differences occur for various reasons, such as biographical, emotional, cognitive, social, or cultural conditions. The basis for teaching in our case is to acknowledge that our perspectives on the world are subjective and different from those of others - while recognising them to be just that. Communicatively approached, commonalities, intersections, and incompatibilities can be found in shared and different perspectives. And all of those, including differences, can be used as resources in communication training.

6. Learning atmosphere and flow

"Cognition is not possible without emotion." (Roth, 1996, p. 211)

The learning setting and atmosphere play a role in every teaching situation. However, when it comes to personal development, self-reflection and interaction in the group, these factors gain an extraordinarily high significance that must not be underestimated.

In order to be prepared to critically question oneself, to present oneself in front of the group, to communicate, to accept feedback and to give it without reservations, to be prepared to allow changes and to want to learn, an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere is needed. This can be created by establishing respectful, appreciative interaction right from the start and giving learners a sense of security. The participants should feel comfortable, be challenged and at the same time not feel overwhelmed. It is worth investing effort and time in the learning atmosphere from the beginning and establishing it directly in the opening situation. An attempt to work with group feedback with students who hardly know each other, for example, will face difficulties. **It is therefore always worthwhile to have a get-to-know-you session at the beginning of a seminar.**



7. Using and welcoming perturbations

Disturbances or even interruptions should be seen as something positive in this context. A whiteboard marker that is not writing, a forgotten handout, an unfocused group, an unmotivated participant are all factors that can unsettle you as a teacher. At the same time, these influences can lead us to stray from planned seminar routines, choose other methods or allow for unforeseen topics.

"Whoever, therefore, believes him or herself to be already in possession of the complete and assured truth in an area, will, on the one hand, no longer allow him or herself to be perturbed, but, on the other hand, can thereby learn nothing more." (Meyer, 2013, p. 150)

8. Construction, reconstruction and deconstruction

There are three basic didactic approaches (Reich, 2008, p. 138)

Construction

Learners independently solve questions such as, "How can the problem be solved? How can the question be answered?" This is the principle of learning by doing and thus enables participants to find solutions that are useful to them individually and in their everyday lives.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction draws on existing knowledge and models and aims to actively understand, modify and apply them to one's own concrete scenarios. This should not stop at simple acquisition, e.g. in the form of memorisation. "How can this concept be applied to a concrete situation? What is the relevance of this knowledge to my concrete situation in everyday life?"

Deconstruction

Deconstruction refers to a process, in which already learned knowledge and concepts are doubted and questioned. Through this questioning, new insights and approaches to solutions are promoted and old approaches are questioned. The so-called "blind spot" is addressed and reduced when deconstruction refers to old, proven and internalised approaches: "How have I dealt with such situations in the past? What positive effects can this tried and tested approach or a newly learned one have basically? And what negative ones?" These questions hint at the fact that it can be uncomfortable to deconstruct individually already established knowledge and approaches. At the same time, it prevents us from adopting or continuing to use them uncritically and untested.

9. Methodological competence, diversity and interdependence

Particularly for teaching communicative competence, it is necessary not only to discuss content, but to make knowledge tangible, to try it out, to practice it in role plays or to simulate it (method competence). A feedback method, for example, must be tried out in practice - only then do the challenges become visible. Methods should also be selected and mixed according to the content, the group as a whole and the individual participants (method diversity). Not least, situational factors play a role here: some methods might be more suitable for a morning session than a session right after lunch.

Method interdependence means planning and dramaturgically combining different methods. Here, for example, both a deductive approach (a model is discussed cognitively and tried out practically in exercises) and an inductive approach (functional models are developed from practical experience and examples) are possible.

10. Welcoming errors

Not only allowing mistakes but also welcoming them is especially important in the context of social skills. This attitude enables learners to enter practice situations as uninhibitedly as possible and is essential for a supportive learning atmosphere. Of course, supposedly wrong approaches or actions can also just be considered by participants as viable and suitable for everyday life. Such a situation can, on the one hand, bring us back to point X and, on the other hand, provide perturbations as well as a productive basis for discussion (deconstruction). For example, if a student has difficulty giving non-judgemental feedback, this provides an opportunity to pose a question to the group. It may turn out that several people feel the same way or even that the usefulness of non-judgemental feedback is questioned by several people. Such a situation offers the ideal opportunity to raise this point for discussion, to think up concrete scenarios in the group and to discuss possible impacts.

At the same time, we as teachers would do well to be open and generous towards our own supposed mistakes.

11. Evaluation and supervision

This point causes some teachers a queasy feeling. But, as Siebert (2005, p. 124) rightly puts it, "This is not about self-criticism, which tends to diminish the pleasure of teaching, but about expanding one's repertoire of actions". Regular evaluations should therefore be a standard procedure for teachers in the field of communicative competences. The aim is to remain flexible in the design of processes, methods and approaches, and to provide learners with new viable insights and skills again and again. Evaluations can be carried out in various forms, both quantitative and qualitative.



Purely quantitative evaluations are often not very useful for the teacher and may cause more uncertainty than new insights. It is good to collect feedback anonymously or - if oral - at least semi-anonymously in a small group and then present it in a bundle. Targeted questions, for example, about how knowledge can be applied in everyday life, can focus the group's attention on learning successes in a didactically effective way.

As a teacher, firstly you should always bear in mind that feedback on your content and didactics should not be confused with criticism of you as a person. Second, it is not possible to objectively assess the quality of your teaching (as discussed above: subjectivity of perspectives). And third, as (Siebert, 2005, p. 123) points out, "learners usually cannot, with the best will in the world, judge what they have 'really' learned. Many learning effects often become noticeable only later." The possibility of regular supervision is additionally a great option, not only if you are stuck in didactic: for example, in the form of a colleague who attends your session and gives you feedback afterwards.

12. Continuing Education

Connecting topics that concern communicative competence and its didactics beyond the boundaries of disciplines can be found in plenty in psychology, linguistics, philosophy, neurobiology, sociology and pedagogy. Concepts such as constructivism, critical thinking, theme-centred interaction, the systemic approach, or various approaches to counseling ground and enrich the approaches presented here. Further engagement with them will not only enrich your teaching in terms of content and according to current developments and thus benefit your students. It will also strengthen you in your teaching and give you security.



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