



Confronting Students' Personal and Interpersonal Communication Anxieties and Needs Through Constitutive, Experiential Communication Pedagogy

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Abstract: Today's college students are experiencing unprecedented high levels of anxiety, resulting in devastating effects. This essay challenges communication educators to respond directly to this significant issue by employing an experiential pedagogy that offers students constitutive opportunities to initiate, experiment with, and receive feedback about new communicative behaviors that will enable them to interact well and achieve positive outcomes in high anxiety-inducing interactions. The essay explicates how that constitutive, experiential pedagogy informs the course "Communication and Human Relations," enabling students to acquire communication competencies to reduce their anxiety about and to manage effectively their personal and interpersonal communication difficulties.

Although college students always have faced mental health issues, those issues are at an all-time high today (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019). Lipson et al.'s (2019) longitudinal study of college students' mental health service utilization, using 10 years (2007–2017) of annual survey data from 155,026 students across 196 college campuses, found that those diagnosed with a mental health challenge increased from 21.9% in 2007 to 35.5% in 2016–2017, and that 26.9% screened positive for depression. Additionally, Gruttadaro and Crudo's (2012) survey for the National Alliance on Mental Health found that 80% of students felt overwhelmed by their college responsibilities, 50% rated their mental health as below average or poor, 50% struggled greatly from anxiety that affected school performance adversely, and 30% had schoolwork problems because of mental health issues. As these (and many other) studies have revealed, today's

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college students face a “campus mental health ‘epidemic’” (Gross, 2019), which, undoubtedly, in this unprecedented moment in the 21st century, has been exacerbated significantly by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic!

Despite experiencing mental health issues, 40% of affected college students fail to seek help (Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012) and many stop taking (often, intermittently) their antidepressant medications (at record numbers for this “antidepressant generation”; Iarovici, 2014), putting on a happy face, instead; in large measure, because of the stigma and culture of silence associated with mental health (see, e.g., Joy, 2018). That combination is a recipe for disaster, with, for instance, one in five U.S. college students having had thoughts of suicide (Liu et al., 2019), and 1,100 committing suicide each year, the second-leading cause of death among U.S. college students (Rosiek et al., 2016).

Explanations about why current college students experience such high levels of stress/anxiety focus almost exclusively on “external” issues, such as increased costs (from tuition to housing), materialistic societal values (e.g., consumerism and financial success), and parental expectations, as well as, when bad, the economy. Today’s college students, especially those with controlling (e.g., “helicopter” and “bulldozer”) parents, have a high external locus of control, seeing their lives as directed by outside forces and other people (Dreher et al., 2014). The almost sole focus on external mental health issues, however, leaves two major gaps: “internal/personal” and “interpersonal/relational” challenges. Little to no emphasis has been placed on, for instance, identity and self-esteem issues, relationship issues, and connections between personal and interpersonal issues.

An important question in this context is the extent to which education, in general, develops students’ competencies to manage their personal and interpersonal difficulties. Bowen’s (1978) classic work more than 40 years ago found that college education had only a moderate impact on students’ personal dimension (e.g., verbal skills and empathy), and if Konrath et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis 37 years later, showing a 40% decline (since 2000) in college students’ empathetic concern for and willingness to take others’ perspective, is any indication, college education today may be having even less effects.

Developing students’ competencies to manage personal/interpersonal issues is especially important for communication educators, for, from a constitutive communication perspective (see Craig, 1999), those issues are produced through communication (with problematic interactions, such as conflict between relational partners, creating anxiety about subsequent interactions), and, from a transactional perspective, those issues are managed via communicative practices (e.g., conflict-management communication competencies are required to benefit from relational conflict interactions). Examples of communication difficulties that students have identified (from the course described below), and a representative statement acknowledging problematic behavior that they want to change, include:

- a. Sharing perceptions/feelings about themselves with others (e.g., “I seldom admit to others that I am wrong”)
- b. Expressing “positive” perceptions/feelings of others (e.g., “I want but do not tell my parents that I love them”)
- c. Expressing “negative” perceptions/feelings of others in healthy ways (e.g., “Whenever I confront my friends, I scream at them, which just makes the situation worse”)

- d. Receiving “negative” feedback about themselves (e.g., “Immediately, I get defensive when someone confronts me”)
- e. Responding to others’ emotional expressions (e.g., “I try to stop my partner’s crying because I do not know what else to say in that moment”)
- f. Asking for and/or offering aid/support (“I want but do not ask others for support, because I see it as being weak, although I love offering others support”)
- g. Talking with someone to whom they are attracted physically (“It is incredibly difficult for me to talk with someone to whom I am attracted”)
- h. Communicating with people perceived to be very different from themselves, such as people of other races and cultures (e.g., “I am cautious about what I say to someone of another race, because I don’t want to be perceived as ‘racist’”)
- i. Meta-communicating about relationships (“I want to but don’t talk with my partner about our communication problems”)

We contend, based on our longtime professor and student experiences, respectively, that although some communication courses address personal and interpersonal communication difficulties (e.g., romantic relationship issues in interpersonal communication courses) and a few offer experiential learning opportunities (e.g., public speaking course activities to reduce students’ anxiety about giving speeches), most courses privilege theory and research over (and, sometimes, to the exclusion of) application and experiential practice. Communication education, consequently, rarely enables students to acquire competencies needed to communicate effectively (e.g., in appropriate, sincere, and personal and relational growth-producing ways) in the type of high anxiety-producing interactions identified above. Although it is valuable to learn theory and research about, for instance, beneficial effects of asking for support when needed, changing high-stressed students’ lack of asking for support because it shows weaknesses demands educational opportunities to enact and experience that behavior’s benefits. The relative dearth of such communication education is a significant lost opportunity for both communication educators and students.

Although experiential learning has received much scholarly attention (see, e.g., Beard & Wilson, 2013), many classroom-based practices, such as students analyzing case studies of other people (see, e.g., Braithwaite & Wood, 2015) and participating in highly structured artificial “activities” (e.g., icebreakers) address only indirectly the specific needs of the individual students in those classrooms. Other experiential learning immerses students in “real-world” experiences (e.g., internships, service-learning, and study abroad), but, typically, offer limited guided instruction about developing communication competencies from those experiences. Although all of those pedagogical practices are valuable for “learning-by-doing,” they do not offer experiential opportunities for individual students to initiate, experiment with, and practice (often not successfully the first few times) new communicative behaviors that will enable them to interact well and achieve positive outcomes (e.g., more intimate relationships) in what, eventually, they viewed previously to be high anxiety-inducing interactions.

To illustrate a constitutive, experiential pedagogy that offers opportunities for students to initiate and experiment with new communicative competencies to address their personal and interpersonal

communication anxieties, the next section offers an example of such a communication course (called “Communication and Human Relations”). The course reveals the importance and value of this communication pedagogy.

Communication and Human Relations Course

“Communication and Human Relations” (CHR) is an interpersonal communication senior seminar that has been taught by Frey at least once a year for the last 45 years (Loker served as a “facilitator-in-training” for a section). According to Frey and White (2012):

CHR provides opportunities for students to understand more fully, critically reflect on, and enact alternatives to taken-for-granted communication principles and practices in dyadic and group settings by participating in creating and understanding how the constitutively constructed high-quality relationships with course members. (p. 299)

To accomplish those goals, the course employs a method (actually, a discipline, a practice, and an art form) of “encounter” that is used to nurture personal growth in relating among people.¹ A primary focus of this learning is the development of the group itself, with members developing from, generally, being strangers to as gratifying and growthful a group as they can create. Group members learn from interacting, being involved in relating, seeing how their efforts turned out, and perceiving how their communication affected these outcomes.

The purpose of this method is to observe and discuss interpersonal communication that develops “naturally” in the group itself. Group members cooperate to develop values, norms, leadership, and working procedures for understanding effectively their interpersonal communication. CHR groups, therefore, provide a medium for participants to experience interactions from which they can enhance their awareness, confidence, skillfulness, and knowledge about themselves, others, and interpersonal/group processes. Through active, committed participation in the group, members assess their interpersonal strengths and weaknesses, and experiment with new ways of relating with others. CHR groups, thus, are training sessions in human relations, with participants examining their level of functioning in interpersonal interactions, becoming resource persons for communicative behaviors that they perform at a high level, and learning communicative behaviors that they employ at a lower level.

Operationally, with the exception of an opening-day lecture that explains the course, and, toward the middle of the semester, 4 weeks of short group presentations (and accompanying structured activities), there are no lectures, discussion of assigned readings (except at the start of sessions, if students wish), weekly topics, and/or structured activities. Instead, for the 2.5 hours per week that class sessions meet, members sit in a circle (which makes clear that they are there to engage each other rather than to get a message from an authority figure), with no paper, pens, computers, or anything else on their desks (except beverages), and engage in “here-and-now” communication about what is occurring at that moment in the group as members interact (e.g., sharing their perceptions of and feelings for one another), as opposed to “there-and-then” communication about past or present events in society or in their lives (unless directly relevant to members’ behavior in the group; see, e.g., Egan, 1973). Thus, members, at that moment in time, are the “content” of class discussions.

During the first few classes, students tend to flee the CHR group situation by talking about there-and-then material, with the facilitator intervening to maintain a here-and-now focus (e.g., asking what the

topic of conversation has to do with members right at that moment, or stating perceived intentions of members' statements, such as attempting to flee the moment); eventually, members regulate their here-and-now communication.

One useful starting point is to ask members to share a communication limitation/weakness that they want to change, which leads to contracts being made that hold members accountable for what they need to accomplish. Members then experiment with new communicative behaviors to accomplish their goals, receiving feedback from others that helps them to become more competent engaging in those behaviors (both in and out of the course). For instance, a person who does not initiate relationships but waits for others to initiate with them is encouraged (indeed, confronted) to identify a specific member they want to get to know and communicate their desire to that person. For those who do not engage in that behavior, that simple communication act represents (and feels physically to be) a significant risk that challenges them to go beyond how they communicate typically, but which “they sense are harmonious with their deeper values regarding who they want to be” (Frey & White, 2012, p. 300). Thus, as Frey and White (2012) noted, “When the group is working most effectively, members sense that they are taking risks, being more honest and open than usual” (p. 300). Paradoxically, taking high anxiety-producing communication risks and experiencing their communication competencies and positive effects (e.g., invariably, members approached are appreciative) results in those behaviors being seen as far less risky and anxiety-provoking. As a student wrote in a response paper:

What I noted is that is that under pressure of risk, I safeguard or do the opposite of what I feel the most. In the “waters of the course,” the biggest failure I can do is to not speak or to buckle to my fear of being accepted. So what did I do? I spoke first. I set the precedent for speaking. This is alarming (even to me), when I took a risk I am not comfortable doing. In essence, I was learning how to swim in my environment. (Frey & White, 2012, pp. 305–306)

This student, thus, confronted an important communication issue that made them highly anxious; made the choice to engage in risky, atypical communicative behavior; and learned experientially that they had the communication competencies needed to “swim” and not “drown.”

This is a difficult course to teach, especially in a college environment, where students experience tremendous pressure to conform to “traditional” ways of doing things, including how to communicate (e.g., what can and cannot be said to others). Indeed, despite their youth and vibrancy, college students are some of the most closed people when it comes to personal and interpersonal communication growth. They live in fear that, for instance, they will not be liked if they admit their communication weaknesses. That fear leads them to spend the first third of the course testing the waters very carefully and, slowly, creating a supportive environment, they then work seriously on their communication issues (and, at that time, structured activities involving all students interacting can be employed effectively).

Facilitating this learning process requires juggling a number of roles and behaviors simultaneously. First, the facilitator refuses to perform some “traditional” teacher behaviors that students expect (e.g., structuring class discussions of specific topics or not saving them from silence), to enable students to take initiative, but the facilitator also enacts those behaviors when appropriate (e.g., directing members' behavior when they are ready to work, such as asking them to identify a member they see as being very different from themselves and discussing those perceived differences). Second, the facilitator strives to be a member who models desired communicative behaviors (e.g., sharing their perceptions of members' communication strengths and weaknesses). Third, the facilitator fulfills course instructor responsibilities,

including grading students' work, although because of the importance of students choosing (rather than being required) to share themselves, group discussion participation is not graded; instead, evaluation is based on written work (e.g., weekly papers using concepts from assigned readings to discuss members' communication choices during sessions; two analysis papers that compare scholarship about, for instance, CHR group development with the group's progress; and an application paper about a dyadic interaction that they facilitated, using CHR practices, with someone not in the course) and a group presentation (e.g., about healthy confrontation practices).

Conclusion

The unique course described in this essay represents one attempt to respond to the high level of anxiety that college students experience about their communicative behavior, offering them a constitutive, experiential opportunity to work on their communication limitations as they create high-quality relationships with group members. Although not all instructors can or would want to teach such a course, as Frey and White (2012) noted, communication instructors can adopt aspects of this pedagogy, such as engaging students in course-related here-and-now reflective discussions (e.g., project team members sharing their perceptions and feelings about their and fellow members' task efforts). Even that small amount of constitutive, experiential communication education embedded into existing courses will help mitigate college students' high levels of communication anxiety and their devastating effects.

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Notes

1. CHR represented a main trajectory at the start of interpersonal communication scholarship (see, e.g., Giffin & Patton, 1974) but was displaced by quantitative, strategic communication (primarily, because CHR advocates did not publish), which came to dominate that field and still does today.