COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

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Objectives

- To raise awareness of one’s own expectations and definitions of, and preferences for, collaborative communication
- To discuss factors that affect perceptions about effective and/or appropriate communicative interactions
- To explore strategies for creating an effective framework for collaboration, as well as strategies for recognizing and reconciling misunderstandings
Things to Bear in Mind: How Do YOU Define These Terms?

- Communication is . . .
  - to a purpose:
  - Why are we here?
  - What is my role?
  - What are MY pet peeves?

- Collaboration is . . .
  - an equal contribution according to our strengths:
  - Who are the players?
  - What is the desired outcome?
  - What is our timeframe?
The Interpersonal Aspect

- Face-to-Face versus Written Communication
  - Margin for error
  - Agreeing on the protocol
  - Respecting the expectations of all involved regarding:
    - Language
    - Medium
    - Purpose
    - Pragmatics
Strategies for Effective Communication

- Raising Awareness
- Negotiation of Meaning
- Facework
- Habitual Clarification
Raising Awareness

- Linguistic disconnect
  - What is the most polite way to address your colleague?
  - To disagree?
  - To interject?

- Paralinguistic disconnect
  - What does this gesture mean?

- Socio-cultural disconnect
  - What is the first thing to be discussed?
  - The last thing?
  - What kind of content information would be useful?
Negotiation of Meaning

- A term used often in Second Language teaching, this is where two or more persons determine what is being discussed and how by a series of exchanges.

- Collaborators often bring different visions of the final product to a project. Discussing the desired outcome from the outset and working toward a common vision can often improve productivity and cut down on heated debates.

- Never be afraid to ask questions, and reformulate until you get the answers you need!

  Asking the “right” questions.
  
  What do you think?
  
  What do we want to accomplish?
  
  What do we need to do to reach our goal?
Strategies for Negotiating Meaning

- Inclusive Language
  - Treat this like the group-effort it is.
  - Avoid responses that seem to center on your view.

- Avoid Negative Language
  - Contradictions are rarely helpful, and often misunderstood.

- Use Three-Way Communication
  - A common safety protocol that can be used to good effect in most high-risk miscommunication contexts.
  1. Listen for meaning until the speaker has completed the thought.
  2. Rephrase or summarize the utterance for accurate comprehension.
  3. Respond to the idea accordingly.
Facework

- Facework is a term used in many fields. For our purposes, it will refer to the extra-context elements of interpersonal interaction that are necessary to maintaining a positive group dynamic. Elements of facework that come into play in collaboration include:
  - Face-threatening acts.
  - Value assumptions.
  - Humor or sharing personal details.
Strategies to Maintain Face

- Use effective word choice.
  - Challenge versus Problem (Russell, 2004)
- Focus on the objectives decided by the group.
  - Praise good work done by each individual.
  - Keep it professional. Don’t allow anyone to be singled out.
  - Find creative ways to deal with perceived failings.
    - Determine if there was a misunderstanding about what was wanted.
    - Swap tasks to see if there’s a better fit.
    - Determine if the task could be done another way.
    - Reexamine the desired outcome and brainstorm new ways to get there.
Habitual Clarification

- Our memories often play tricks on us, and we remember what WE think we were supposed to do, and not what was expected of us. Ways to stay on task include:
  - Frequent notes or requests for clarification. When in doubt, ask!
  - A log—email, memo, or other written document—that all members of the group have access to.
  - A chart with the steps clearly outlined and completion dates.
  - Planned meetings or check-in points.
    - Sometimes there is nothing to be done until one part of the project is complete. It’s still worthwhile to bolster up the “face” and participate by encouragement/interest.
When it All Breaks Down

- **Emotional Backlash**
  - Discomfort often founded in an unintentional slight.

- **Personality Conflict**
  - Perceptions of the world and how to communicate in it can be influenced by:
    - Family
    - Field
    - Society
    - Culture
    - Other
Taking a Step Back

- Coping strategies begin with awareness that something has gone wrong, and the ability to step back from the personal discomfort and view the situation dispassionately. There are two perspectives:
  - Recognize that someone else is upset.
    - Body language
    - Tone of voice/word choice
    - Attitude
  - Recognize YOU are upset.
    - Discomfort or irritation with someone or something said.
Strategies for communication breakdown: He looks upset….

- Be direct.
  - Often people don’t realize what has bothered them—they just perceive that somehow you’ve been disrespectful. Force them to address that feeling or concern.

- Be honest.
  - Especially if English isn’t your first language, this isn’t your field of study, or you’ve had a hard time getting the hang of the context, let them know that perhaps you made a mistake. Ask them to help you pinpoint it. You don’t have to lose face to say, “Perhaps I didn’t word that the best way. Maybe I need a bit more coffee. Could you tell me what you understood, and I’ll see if I can clarify my idea?”

  - Sometimes nothing is bothering them but a headache, and this concern becomes attention to their personal well-being. Thoughtful people make good collaborators. 😊
Strategies for communication breakdown: I’M upset....

- Do NOT respond. Take a minute and decide WHY you feel upset.
  - The words they used?
    - You look short.
  - They weren’t polite?
    - Must I fill this out?
  - They presumed upon your time or good will?
    - I know you will help me study.

- ALWAYS assume they didn’t mean it.
  - Give them the benefit of the doubt, and give them a chance to try again.
  - Use 3-Way-Communication, rephrasing it as would make more sense in the conversation before the disconnect.
    - “You want to know if you need to complete this form, right?”
In Essence

- Especially for situations where a high level of interpersonal difference can cause points for misunderstanding, facework and the need for written reinforcement should be stressed.

- Awareness of one’s own understanding of how to communicate, and the other ways that are possible, can help keep collaboration a creative and open process.

- Agreed-upon protocols and clearly defined terms and goals will go a long way when collaborating in interdisciplinary or intercultural contexts.
Some Interesting Reading