

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND DISCUSSION SKILLS

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REGARDLESS OF THE content specialty—from accounting to information systems to finance—employers view effective communication as critical to an individual’s success in today’s competitive workplace. Most business degree programs require a business communication course to help students develop communication skills needed both in getting a job and in succeeding in the workplace. In addition to traditional writing and speaking proficiency, business communication courses should also stress the less emphasized but necessary skills of listening, phone usage, meeting management, collaboration, and interpersonal communication. To provide specific help in developing interpersonal communication and discussion skills critical to success in business and society (McPherson, 2005), this article promotes effective discussion in a group setting. Specifically, this activity helps students identify and practice effective interpersonal behaviors in a professional context while exploring relevant issues confronting managers and businesses today.

The activity uses a “fishbowl” discussion, a term derived from the format of the discussion. For the activity, a portion of the class meets in the center of the room as active participants, with the remaining members of the class seated around the discussion group as observers—listening to and evaluating the dynamics of the smaller group (Dutt, 1997; Hensley, 2002; Silberman & Hansburg, 2004). The

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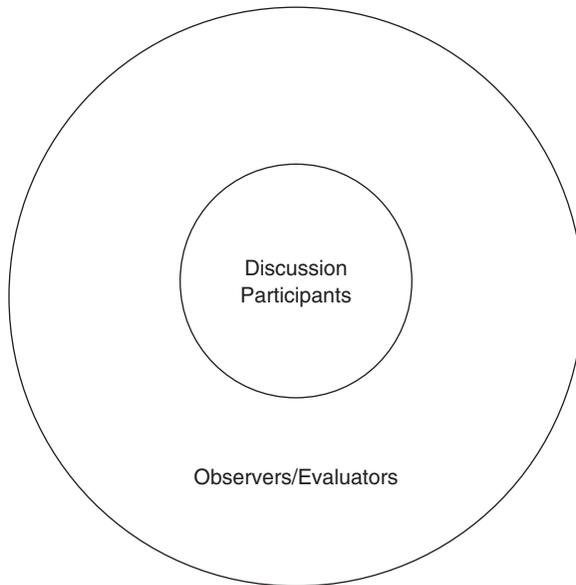


Figure 1. Model of Fishbowl Discussion

participants are surrounded by the observers, similar to fish in a fishbowl, as shown in Figure 1.

RATIONALE

This activity has value for several reasons. In the setup of many fishbowl discussions, participants focus mainly on the content covered. In this variation, evaluators consider not only the content discussed but also the communication activities that help or hinder discussion. The structure provides a systematic way to identify, examine, and teach specific interpersonal communication behaviors. Often, students do not consciously think about those skills that facilitate or hamper discussion and communication with others. The activity provides an opportunity for an entire class to participate by requiring students to either participate in a discussion or evaluate one.

In addition to promoting effective interpersonal and discussion skills, the activity pushes students to conduct research and form opinions on topics relevant to the course as well as their future

professional life. Through the activity, the focus shifts from the teacher to the students, with the students becoming the experts and having the opportunity to teach one another—a significant method for promoting deeper learning among students (Anderson & Soden 2001; Kjellin & Stenfors, 2003).

PROCEDURE

In a typical class of about 30, an instructor may divide the students into groups of 5 or 6. Groups should be large enough so that various points of view exist but small enough that participation among all group members is reasonable. After groups are formed, they must determine the topic they will research and discuss. The instructor may assign topics or establish guidelines to allow groups to choose their own. Topics should be of relative interest to the whole group but also controversial or complicated enough to provide multiple points of view—topics where no one right answer or position exists.

To make topics more meaningful, instructors should direct students to consider issues in a professional context. For example, if a group selects the topic of same-gender relationships, the professional context could be whether Company X should provide benefits to same-gender partners of employees. Such a context encourages students to consider relevant business-related implications: the financial impact of the decision along with the impact on various internal and external stakeholders, the company image and reputation, and international perceptions. Within a professional context, students can also research existing companies and organizations dealing with similar issues.

Other topics may include such issues as discrimination or harassment in the workplace, women and the “glass ceiling,” affirmative action, ethical decision making and corporate responsibility, consumer or employee privacy, and other topics related to current issues and news. Developing a professional context helps give the discussion focus and purpose. For instance, the issue of discrimination in the workplace becomes more relevant when viewed from an organizational standpoint. A group with this topic could assume Company Y has been accused of discrimination in hiring and promoting employees, and their group is a consulting firm who has been retained to help with the situation. In such a context, several questions become germane and direct the group’s research and discussion: How does a company define discrimination? What are the advantages of diversity in the

workplace? How does a company create an effective policy promoting diversity? How can companies effect and sustain change related to discrimination? How is a company's image and success related to discrimination? How should companies respond to charges of discrimination, internally and externally? How should they respond to special interest groups? Although effective interpersonal skills may be valuable independent of context, most meetings and professional discussions have a goal, something participants take away, typically leading to some action. Framing the controversial topics within professional contexts adds greater piquancy and meaning to the discussions.¹

Once topics have been selected, individuals work independently to conduct research in preparation for the discussion. Students are encouraged to look for material that represents multiple viewpoints. Once individuals have sufficiently researched the topic, the group meets together to create a list of 8 to 10 key questions the group thinks ought to be posed or addressed during the discussion. To better use limited class time, students can rank the questions and address them in order of importance. Dealing with the questions in order of importance helps to ensure that the most pertinent issues are covered. Students should turn in the final list of questions the class session prior to the group's discussion to make certain adequate preparation occurs.

Before the actual discussions take place, the instructor should spend time in class reviewing behaviors and actions that either help or hinder meaningful group communication. Table 1 details some positive and negative behaviors associated with interpersonal communications and group discussions.

Once positive and negative behaviors are listed, students can be encouraged to evaluate the relative harm or merit of the behaviors. For instance, representing an opposing point of view (particularly an unpopular one) may be more difficult than just providing a relevant comment and should count more in the actual discussion. Or monopolizing a discussion or attacking someone may be so detrimental to discussion that students displaying these behaviors should be penalized more severely.

From the discussion of negative and positive behavior, the instructor creates an evaluation form and informs students that they will be scored by others in the class for their positive and negative behaviors during the fishbowl discussion—points awarded for positive behaviors and points deducted for negative behaviors. Figure 2 shows a possible evaluation form created from behaviors listed in Table 1, with relative point values for the corresponding behaviors.

Table 1. Positive and Negative Discussion Behaviors

<i>Positive Discussion Behaviors</i>	<i>Negative Discussion Behaviors</i>
Taking a position on an issue	Distracting others
Providing a relevant comment	Not paying attention
Supporting a position with evidence	Interrupting others
Bringing others into the discussion	Asking unnecessary/irrelevant questions
Asking a clarifying question	Monopolizing the discussion
Representing an opposing viewpoint	Attacking another person personally
Demonstrating active listening	

Although an individual evaluation sheet for each student can be used to provide feedback from the instructor and observing students, a group evaluation form can be created to track discussion behaviors of the entire group during the actual discussion, as shown in Figure 3. A single sheet is sometimes easier to use to capture observation notes about the whole group, and information from the group sheets can later be coalesced by the instructor to provide specific feedback to participating students.

Once students understand the criteria and are familiar with the evaluation forms, the instructor schedules specific dates for the fishbowl discussions. Typically, the actual discussions take approximately 20 to 25 minutes, so two to three groups can present in a single class period, depending upon the length of the class.

In preparing the group for the discussion, groups should select a member of the group to serve as a facilitator. The facilitator starts with a brief introduction (no longer than 2 minutes) of the topic and the purpose of the fishbowl discussion. The introduction explains the organizational context and sets the stage for the discussion. The facilitator may also assume the role of keeping the dialogue moving if conversation wanes. The discussion then proceeds for the allotted time. In the final few minutes, the instructor should let the group know that the time is up and that each person will have 30 seconds to give a final statement about his or her position or feelings about the topic discussed, with the facilitator making final comments, observations, and recommendations within the organizational context.

During the discussion, the other members of the class serve in an observation/evaluation role, making notes and scoring the conversation and interactions using the evaluation form created. At the conclusion of the discussion, the instructor may ask members of the fishbowl what they felt went well and if there is anything they would

Fishbowl Discussion Evaluation Sheet			
Put tally marks by + or – behaviors. After the discussion, multiply the number of marks by the value to determine the score for each behavior; then figure the total points.			
Positive Behaviors	Tally	Score	Comments
Taking a position on an issue (+2)			
Providing a relevant comment (+1)			
Supporting position with evidence/facts (+2)			
Bringing another person into discussion (+1)			
Asking a clarifying question (+1)			
Representing an opposing view (+2)			
Demonstrating active listening (+2)			
Negative Behaviors	Tally	Score	
Distracting others/not paying attention (-2)			
Interrupting others (-2)			
Making unnecessary/irrelevant comments (-2)			
Monopolizing the discussion (-3)			
Attacking another person or position (-3)			
Total Points			

Figure 2. Sample Fishbowl Discussion Evaluation Sheet

	Discussion Members (put tally marks by + or – behaviors)							
	1.	2.	3.	4.				
Positive Behaviors	Tally	Score	Tally	Score	Tally	Score	Tally	Score
Takes a position on an issue (+2)								
Provides a relevant comment (+1)								
Supports position w/evidence (+2)								
Brings another into discussion (+1)								
Asks a clarifying question (+1)								
Represents an opposing view (+2)								
Demonstrating active listening (+2)								
Negative Behaviors	Tally	Score	Tally	Score	Tally	Score	Tally	Score
Distracts others/lacks attention (-2)								
Interrupts others (-2)								
Makes irrelevant comments (-2)								
Monopolizes the discussion (-3)								
Attacks another person (-3)								
Total Points								

Figure 3. Sample Group Fishbowl Discussion Evaluation Form

work to improve if they did the activity again. Evaluators may also ask additional questions of the participants who have become the subject matter experts on their assigned topic. The evaluators can also provide brief feedback, focusing on the some of the strengths and weaknesses observed during the discussion. The follow-up conversation provides an opportunity to reemphasize and reinforce those behaviors that help and hinder interpersonal interactions and discussion.

CONCLUSION

The activity described provides an alternative to traditional communication activities often assigned in business communication classes, focusing on verbal skills critical to students' success. In addition to being competent presenters, students need effective interpersonal, discussion, and conversation skills for the workplace. Those adept with these skills are more apt to be hired and are more successful once they are on the job (McShulskis, 1996; Zorn & Violanti, 1996). Additionally, the activity provides students with an opportunity to research a topic, form an opinion, present evidence, and listen actively, all within a professional context. Such an activity will help students better gain the essential verbal skills critical to their success in the workplace.

NOTE

1. We wish to thank an anonymous *BCQ* reviewer for this observation.

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