

Using empathetic listening to build relationships at the center

By: [Kimberly M. Cuny](#), Sarah M. Wilde, and Alexandra Vizzier Stephenson

Cuny, K.M., Wilde, S.M. & Stephenson, A.V. (2012). Empathetic listening to build relationships at the center, In E. Yook & W. Atkins Sayre (Eds.), *Communication Centers and Oral Communication Programs in Higher Education: Advantages, Challenges, and New Directions*. (pp. 249-256). Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Pages 249-256, *Communication Centers and Oral Communication Programs in Higher Education: Advantages, Challenges, and New Directions* edited by Eunkyong Lee Yook and Wendy Atkins-Sayre, 2012, reproduced by permission of Rowman & Littlefield
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780739184622/Communication-Centers-and-Oral-Communication-Programs-in-Higher-Education-Advantages-Challenges-and-New-Directions>

All rights reserved. Please contact the publisher for permission to copy, distribute or reprint. © 2012 Lexington Books.

Abstract:

Administrators and staff at communication centers have many responsibilities: increasing publicity, making sure things run smoothly, gaining buy-in from faculty across the curriculum, and recruiting and training staff, to note a few. Emery (2006) argued that successful communication centers are developed in line with the needs of particular institutions and their students. Services are rendered through peer tutors who are trained to review the assignment requirements and listen to the needs of students seeking their assistance, as well as to provide feedback for improvement during simulated practice sessions (Yook, 2006). Tutors at some centers also provide some instruction in the form of workshops for students. As with any job, there are unwritten responsibilities that may not appear in the job description--namely, building positive relationships with and among peer tutors.

Keywords: listening skills | empathetic listening | communication centers | speaking skills

Article:

Administrators and staff at communication centers have many responsibilities: increasing publicity, making sure things run smoothly, gaining buy-in from faculty across the curriculum, and recruiting and training staff, to note a few. Emery (2006) argued that successful communication centers are developed in line with the needs of particular institutions and their students. Services are rendered through peer tutors who are trained to review the assignment requirements and listen to the needs of students seeking their assistance, as well as to provide feedback for improvement during simulated practice sessions (Yook, 2006). Tutors at some centers also provide some instruction in the form of workshops for students. As with any job, there are unwritten responsibilities that may not appear in the job description--namely, building positive relationships with and among peer tutors.

Focusing on the work of the communication center at a mid-sized public university, our chapter seeks to show how peer-to-peer tutoring incorporates empathetic listening to build lasting relationships between peers, i.e., between staff and their speaker-clients (heretoforth referred to as speakers). Although the concept of empathetic listening has been studied predominantly in therapist-client contexts, we apply it to the relationships developed and maintained in a peer tutoring setting. Both tutoring and therapy involve face-to-face relationship-building conversations requiring an active level of listening. This chapter attempts to connect empathetic listening, unconditional positive regard, and confirmation to the success of individual peer tutors. We believe that through the employment of empathetic listening techniques including focusing, encouraging, and reflecting skills, unconditional positive regard, confirmation, immediacy behaviors, and application of the SOFTEN technique, more successful peer relationships will develop.

Empathetic Listening

In Ward and Schwartzman's (2009) empirical study of the dynamics of speaking center consultations, they note that consultant-speaker relationships are an integral part of communication centers. Though this relationship begins to evolve within minutes, it has a critical impact on the success of communication centers. Listening is a large part of that relational success.

Empathetic listening is a major communication competency utilized by peer educators at communication centers as they build relationships with speakers. Empathetic listening should be used in all situations at communication centers. This type of listening requires listeners to refrain from judging the speaker and instead advocates placing themselves in the speaker's position. Doing so allows the listener to understand the speaker's point of view.

Characteristics of empathetic listening include being aware and being in the present moment, acknowledging the other, resisting distractions, noting all of the speaker's nonverbal and verbal communication, and being empathetic to the speaker's thoughts and feelings (Burley-Allen, 1995). Empathetic listening requires that the listener show both verbally and nonverbally that listening is truly taking place. Stewart and Logan (2002) discuss three competencies in developing empathetic listening: focusing, encouraging, and reflection.

Focusing Skills

Focusing skills, the first competency of empathetic listening, entails being attentive to the person you are helping. To implement these skills, the peer tutor must make appropriate eye contact and react responsively while facing the speaker. When peer tutors are facilitating a consultation, whether it is with a group or an individual, they should make every effort to maximize eye contact with the speaker. Regardless of whether the speaker is seeking feedback on a presentation, watching a recording of themselves giving a presentation with the intent of goal-setting for future class presentations, or working on interpersonal competencies (such as conversational turn taking behaviors), the staff members should strive to maintain eye contact in order to make the speaker feel comfortable and appreciated. However, as the staff member must

at times look down to write notes on the report form, the speaker should be alerted in advance so as to maintain their sense of validation. Also, with an influx of English language learners utilizing center services, it has become imperative for the staff to be mindful of the impact of cultural implications on eye behaviors (i.e., to know that some cultures may be uncomfortable with sustained direct eye contact).

Through their work at the center, the staff learns the benefits of connecting with their audience and taking the necessary measures to be attentive to their speakers. Sometimes staff find themselves facing difficult situations such as having to deal with a dysfunctional group with aggressive members, speakers who do not have a clear idea of what the class assignment entails, those who want the staff to break the honor code or academic integrity policy and write their speeches for them, or faculty members requesting a staff presentation for a time frame that is not feasible. Fortunately, staff members do not typically have to deal with such challenging situations; nevertheless, they must always be prepared to handle all communication professionally while still being attentive to the speaker. Focusing skills can make the difference in these situations. Sometimes reacting responsibly means suggesting that the speaker visit another organization on campus such as the Speech and Hearing Center, Psychological Services, or The Dean of Students (for students in distress) to receive even more specialized assistance. Serving in the role of peer tutor, the staff must know their own limits for helping others and listen carefully to make the necessary referrals.

When providing constructive feedback to a speaker, the staff members should do so in a careful manner so as not to embarrass or undermine self-worth. During consultations, peer tutors typically sit with the speaker and use an open posture in which they face the speaker throughout the entire consultation. Additionally, in attending to speakers, staff members need to be cognizant of their word choices, especially in challenging situations, to ensure that the words are constructive yet assertive. Staff members should be encouraged to employ "I" language rather than "you" language. In teaching consultants about "I" language we suggest reading the extensive review of its effectiveness offered by Proctor and Wilcox (1993). "I" language allows tutors to own their messages, rather than to assign blame. Starting a sentence with "I" instead of "you" (such as in the following sentence: "I felt . . . when you . . . because. . ."), allows messages to be more descriptive and less judgmental. At the close of every consultation, speakers are given the opportunity to fill out feedback via an online survey. This process communicates to our speakers that we value what they have to offer and that we are listening. Feedback is carefully considered for staff performance reviews.

Encouraging Skills

Stewart and Logan's (2002) second competency involves motivating the other to talk more. In order to motivate the speaker, the peer tutor can mirror, or repeat, the speaker's words in order to encourage more elaboration on a given topic. The peer tutor can also ask clarifying and open questions that require more than a yes/no response. By listening actively and using moderate self-disclosure, the peer tutor demonstrates interest in what the speaker is saying. For example, if the speaker discloses that they live in a particular dorm on campus, the peer tutor may also share information about the dorm in which they live. In turn this allows the speaker to become more comfortable and provide more valid information that enables the listener to ask relevant

questions (Burley-Allen, 1995). This sets into motion a supportive chain of interactions in which the speaker feels more accepted and validated.

Speakers come into the center with a varying level of understanding of public, group, and interpersonal communication as well as the details of the assignment for which they are using the services of the center. Sometimes the speakers come in with a copy of their class assignment which makes it easier for the peer tutor to more effectively work with a speaker, but many times the peer tutors must motivate their speakers to talk more about the assignment and their comfort level with speaking in front of, or with, others. The staff members must listen carefully to determine how best to help individual speakers to determine whether they need help in boosting their self-esteem, being more assertive when speaking, managing their public speaking anxiety, articulating their points more clearly, connecting with their audience, or organizing their ideas. Careful listening can help the staff to determine what questions to ask in order to clearly identify the main goal of the speaker's visit.

Reflecting Skills

Stewart and Logan's (2002) final competency entails reflecting the client's perspective. The peer tutor can accomplish this competency through paraphrasing the speaker's words and/or adding an example that the peer tutor believes illustrates the speaker's perspective. To listen effectively one needs to check understanding regularly by summarizing and paraphrasing what the other has said. After summary one must wait for feedback. Following feedback, the consultant needs to either confirm that they share understanding, or offer clarification of what the speaker might have intended.

The staff of a communication center should follow this model of reflective listening during all consultations and communication exchanges. While paraphrasing, reflecting, and summarizing, staff members need to make sure that external and internal distractions do not get in the way. They also work to ensure that they paraphrase both the content and the feelings of the speaker in a non-evaluative way while accurately interpreting their understanding of what they have heard (Ender & Newton, 2000).

In addition to empathetic listening, staff members should utilize empathetic understanding, which is the understanding of another's world through their frame of reference and knowing how they think and feel in regard to the content of the message they are delivering (Ender & Newton, 2000). If a speaker thinks you are truly listening and understanding him or her, then you can help to develop better personal understanding. One way for staff to express this type of understanding is by providing examples from their own speaking experiences, which could include personal struggles. Through practicing empathetic understanding, the staff member will be able to develop a relationship with the speaker and ultimately help the speaker with his or her needs.

Confirmation and Unconditional Positive Regard

True unconditional positive regard and confirmation can only take place when empathetic listening is employed by center staff. The communication center staff helps speakers with their speech endeavors by offering suggestions as well as praise and offering guidance where

appropriate. They do this while simultaneously building a relationship with individual speakers. These relationships, Ward & Schwartzman (2009) conclude, are vital to the work of peer educators in communication centers. It is through the praxis of confirmation, positive regard, and empathetic listening that these relationships are forged.

Rogers (1992) defines unconditional positive regard as "caring for the client, but not in a possessive way or in such a way as simply to satisfy the therapist's own needs" (p. 829). Communication consultants can communicate unconditional positive regard in their tutoring by increasing their use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Immediacy has been defined as "the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between people" (Richmond, 2002, p. 68).

The use of immediacy behaviors in the work of communication centers can be examined in many ways. Our focus here is on the use of face, eyes, and time to increase perceived closeness which can lead to a feeling of being positively cared for or about. Communication consultants who maintain comfortable eye contact and pleasing facial expressions during tutoring sessions while speaking and listening communicate increased unconditional positive regard. Immediate consultants also signal unconditional positive regard to speakers by arriving early for work and starting or ending consultations on time.

Verbal behaviors can also be used to demonstrate unconditional positive regard. In her essay, Wilde (2005) notes verbal immediacy behaviors that a teacher can employ when seeking to be attentive to their students during class. These verbal behaviors include regular use of a speaker's first name during a consultation, proper pronunciation of the speaker's name, verbal messages that encourage and praise (while not forgetting the importance of offering feedback), the use of inclusive language, and the avoidance of a monotone voice. Communication consultants can use these same behaviors to express positive regard when working with speakers.

Confirmation is difficult to define and has yet to be operationalized (Cissna & Anderson, 1994). Although the ways in which individuals confirm each other in relationships are different, confirmation always involves expressing recognition of another's existence, acknowledging that a relationship of affiliation exists, expressing awareness of the significance of the other, and accepting or endorsing the validity of another person's experience (Cissna & Sieburg, 1981).

Buber (1999) writes, "The basis of man's life with man is twofold, and it is one—the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow men in this way" (p. 12). Thus, human instinct makes people want to be confirmed by others. Consultants are positioned well to confirm others given the one-on-one nature of their work.

Center staff can utilize the SOFTENS technique to communicate unconditional positive regard and confirmation. The technique in its origin represents nonverbal behaviors that can be used to mitigate the fear a speaker might experience at the initial contact (of the relationship). While Wassmer (1978) put forth the SOFTENS technique for the initial stage of relationship forming, it extends throughout the peer tutoring process. Body language is listed as one of the seven

characteristics of effective listening, which also contributes to a sense of unconditional positive regard and confirmation (Cobb, 2000).

The original SOFTENS technique involves smiling, open posture, forward lean, touching by shaking hands, eye contact, nodding, and use of space. In applying SOFTENS to communication center work, we advocate changing "T" from touching by shaking hands to taking notes and omitting considerations of space. Thus SOFTENS becomes SOFTEN (smiling, open posture, forward lean, taking notes, eye contact, nodding).

Conclusion

Relationships between the center staff and speakers can be built and maintained through empathetic listening. Moreover, by listening empathetically the staff can create an atmosphere in which the speaker feels comfortable expressing fears and frustrations related to oral communication competencies, to which the staff can respond demonstrating unconditional positive regard or confirmation.

The empathetic approach to listening can be a powerful competency for improving interpersonal skills of communication consultants. Some payoffs include improved working relationships, ability to sell ideas to management, ability to handle emotional individuals, and conducting more effective interviews (Burley-Allen, 1995). Empathetic listening can be used to solve problems, reduce tension, facilitate cooperation, promote communication, develop cognition, and enhance self-concept. True listening assumes that the speaker has worth, dignity, and something to offer; as a result, this attitude ultimately helps the speaker develop self-confidence.

Communication centers are positioned well to make significant contributions to the listening literature. To further research on the topic of listening, for example, empirical studies investigating the development of listening competencies of peer tutors can be conducted. Interviews with past and present tutors could yield rich data to test the hypothesis that peer tutors' listening competencies increase as a result of tutoring at the center. Staff members in training could be given a listening self-assessment at the start of their formal training. The same self-assessment can be distributed at the end of their training and/or at the end of their center employment.

Just as many centers have naturally focused on communication apprehension as a way to get the attention and interest of speakers, listening could offer a similar allure. Centers could strategically make listening a competency that speakers could work on by coming in for a session. Centers could create interactive activities that allow for self-assessment and competency development in private or semi-private, safe environments. As with communication apprehension, center-led listening activities could allow speakers additional aid in building listening competency at the center.

Additionally, many communication centers collect basic data from their clients at the start of a consultation. This data is often used to report to the administration. Centers could easily add a listening question to that data which could contribute to the current listening research. Answers to a question such as, "Have you ever had any formal training in listening?" could open up a brief

conversation about the topic and offer an opportunity for the staff members to promote listening as a competency the speakers might want to come back to work on in the future. Speaker feedback can include a question or two about the consultation experience from a listening perspective. An example of such a question could be, "What behaviors did your consultant use that suggested they were listening?" Data from responses could be collected to further research about listening within the peer tutoring process.

Listening is a central topic for communication centers. For centers that concentrate solely on supporting public speaking competencies, the area of active listening offers a multitude of research possibilities. Faculty members from multiple disciplines often comment that they need to find ways to get their students to listen and pay attention to the presentations of their peers. Advocating for the advancement of the competencies of active listening and audience affirmation would be a good position for these centers to take. Though the potential in this area of research is clear, it remains to be seen whether challenge of researching this new emerging area will be met.

References

Baker, B. T., Watson, K. (2000). *Listen up*. New York: St. Martin's.

Buber, M. (1999). Distance and relation. In J. B. Agassi (Ed.), *Buber on psychology and psychotherapy: Essays, letters and dialogue* (pp. 3-16). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Burley-Allen, M. (1995). *Listening: The forgotten skill: A self-teaching guide* (2 ed.) New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Cissna, K. N., & Anderson, R. (1994). Communication and the ground of dialogue. In R. Anderson, K. N. Cissna, & R. C. Arnett (Eds.), *The reach of dialogue: Confirmation, voice, and community* (pp. 9-30). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Cissna, K. N., & Sieburg, E. (1981). Patterns of interpersonal confirmation and disconfirmation. In C. Wilder-Mott & J. Wealland (Eds.), *Rigor and imagination: Essays from the legacy of Gregory Bateson* (pp. 253-282). Skokie, IL: National Textbook.

Cobb, J. B. (2000). Listening within the social contexts of tutoring: Essential component of the mentoring relationship. *International Journal of Listening*, 14, 94-108.

Emery, D. L. (2006). Front and center: Speaking, listening, and assessment in the contexts of communication instruction. *International Journal of Listening*, 20, 62-65.

Ender, S. C., & Newton, F. B. (2000). *Students helping students: A guide for peer educators on college campuses*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Proctor, R. E., & Wilcox, J. R. (1993). An exploratory analysis of responses to owned messages in interpersonal communication. *Et Cetera: A Review of General Semantics*, 50, 201-220.

Richmond, V. P. (2002). Teacher nonverbal immediacy: Uses and outcomes. In J. L. Chesebro & J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Communication for teachers* (pp. 65-80). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Rogers, C. R. (1992). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, 60*(6), 827-832.

Stewart, J., & Logan, C. (2002). Empathetic and dialogic listening. In J. S. Stewart (Ed.), *Bridges, not walls: A book about interpersonal communication* (8 ed., pp. 208-229) Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Ward, K., & Schwartzman, R. (2009). Building interpersonal relationships as a key to effective speaking center consultations. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 36*(4), 363-372.

Wassmer, A. C. (1978). *Making contact: A guide to overcoming shyness, making new relationships, and keeping those you already have*. New York: Dial Press.

Wilde, S. M. (2005). Helping students have more positive experiences in the classroom: Part 1. **The Successful Professor, 1**(4), 3-5.

Yook, E. L. (2006). Assessment as meta-listening at the communication center. *International Journal of Listening, 20*, 66-68.