

Peer-to-peer tutoring: A model for utilizing empathetic listening to build client relationships in the communication center

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Abstract:

The staff of a college-level speaking center or lab has many responsibilities: increasing publicity, making sure things run smoothly, gaining buy-in from faculty across the curriculum, and recruiting new staff. As with any job, there are unwritten responsibilities that may not appear in the job description - namely, building positive relationships with fellow employees. All members of this speaking center or lab community have the option of simply following their original job description. However, going beyond the minimum and building relationships with each other and with clients creates a supporting, comfortable environment where learning is at its peak and all who enter feel appreciated and as if they are making a difference.

Keywords: listening skills | empathetic listening | speaking centers | peer feedback | higher education

Article:

The staff of a college-level speaking center or lab has many responsibilities: increasing publicity, making sure things run smoothly, gaining buy-in from faculty across the curriculum, and recruiting new staff. As with any job, there are unwritten responsibilities that may not appear in the job description - namely, building positive relationships with fellow employees. All members of this speaking center or lab community have the option of simply following their original job description. However, going beyond the minimum and building relationships with each other and with clients creates a supporting, comfortable environment where learning is at its peak and all who enter feel appreciated and as if they are making a difference.

Speaking centers/labs are systems, not unlike those in the human body, that rely on a series of relationships to maintain their health and sustainability. Speaking centers across the country use peer-to-peer tutoring in accomplishing their mission. Focusing on the speaking center at a mid-size public university in the southeast United States, this article seeks to show how peer-to-peer tutoring incorporates empathetic listening in order to build lasting relationships between peers, whether they be between co-workers or between staff and their clients, to maintain a productive, healthy organization. A secondary focus of this article is to suggest additional research directions related to listening and the work of speaking centers and labs across the country. Although the concept of empathetic listening has been studied in a therapist/client context, it can still be applied to the relationships developed and maintained in a peer tutoring setting (to create more variety of language). In order to fully comprehend the necessity of empathetic listening in peer-to-peer tutoring, it is important to first understand what is meant by a speaking center/lab.

Speaking Center/Lab

At the institution examined here, The University Speaking Center consists of forty-six members in total. There is a director and assistant director, graduate assistants, work study students, and junior staff, managing staff, and consulting staff. With the exception of the director, assistant director, and the graduate assistants, the rest of the staff are undergraduate students who have a variety of majors, range from freshman through seniors, and who all have a passion for helping people. They all strive toward the same goal - fulfilling the center's mission of supporting its clients in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent oral communicators. The staff at the center can be described with synonymous terms, as tutors, peer educators, coaches, mentors. The students can be considered paraprofessionals because they have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers. "These services usually help in the adjustment and satisfaction of students toward the attainment of their educational goals. Students serving in paraprofessional roles are usually supervised by qualified professionals and are compensated in some manner for their services" (Ender, 1983, p.324 as cited in Ender & Newton, 2000).

The consultants provide one-on-one and group consultations as well as create and facilitate interactive workshops on topics related to group and interpersonal communication and public speaking for faculty, staff, and students across campus. This article focuses strictly on the consultation service of the center. The junior staff are currently in the three credit training class required to become a part of the consulting staff. The junior staff spends class time learning both how to do peer-to-peer tutoring and how to create and facilitate workshops. They are also responsible for two weekly hours of shadowing the consulting staff as they facilitate consultations. The managing staff ensures that consultations run smoothly, that the technology is working effectively, and that the necessary report forms for consultations have been filled out. They also serve as mentors in technology trouble-shooting and group bonding activities. Managing consultants serve as the point person for the junior staff to turn to if they have questions or problems. Managers lead the scheduling of orientations (presentations that explain services and resources the center offers) for academic classes or organizations, and also oversee an evening workshop series. The graduate assistant oversees all of the interactive, client-specific workshops for classes and organizations across campus. The director and assistant director serve as mentors to the undergraduates and support their work by filling in during consultations,

workshops, or orientations as needed. The work study students primarily support the center by doing mailings, answering the phone and scheduling appointments, and calling clients to remind them of their scheduled appointments.

The speaking center hierarchy begins with the junior staff, followed by the consulting staff, managing staff, graduate assistants, assistant director, and the director. The hierarchy's main purpose is to create some order, but all staff, junior through managing and above, have equal say in the workings of the center. The center is not micro-managed by the director. After understanding how the center functions, we can now focus on the relationships that occurs in the center.

Unconditional Positive Regard and Confirmation

Relationships in the speaking center develop and need to be fostered, through empathetic listening, between the various staff members (junior staff, managing staff, and consulting staff) as well as between all of the staff and their clients. During the listening process, unconditional positive regard and confirmation must be present between the senders and receivers of the messages. 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). Confirmation can be defined as "the process through which people are 'endorsed' by others, implying a recognition and acknowledgement of them in their personness" (as cited in Cissna & Anderson, 1994, p. 23). Although the ways in which individuals confirm each other in relationships are different, all of the confirmation "expresses recognition of the other's existence, acknowledges a relationship of affiliation with the other, expresses awareness of the worth or significance of the other, and accepts or endorses the validity of the other's experience" (p. 24). Confirmation can lead individuals to realize their importance in the world and their ability to overcome obstacles that inhibit them. 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. As humans, we want to be confirmed about both ourselves and our potential.

Empathetic Listening

Empathetic listening is the major tool used by the staff at speaking centers/labs when building relationships with each other and with their clients. Empathetic listening would be considered level-one listening and should be the goal for listening in all situations. At this level, listeners refrain from judging the talker and place themselves in the other's position, attempting to see things from his/her point of view. Burley-Allen points out the following:

Some characteristics of this level include being aware and in the present moment, acknowledging and responding; and not letting oneself be distracted; paying attention to

the speaker's total communication, including body language; being empathetic to the speaker's own thoughts and feelings to give attention solely to listening. (1995, p.14).

Empathetic listening requires that the listener show both verbally and nonverbally that listening is truly taking place. One should strive to listen from the heart which opens the doorway to understanding, caring, and empathy (Burley-Allen, 1995). In order for a relationship to occur, the therapist must empathize with the client (Rogers, 1992). This empathy occurs through listening to the client and realizing his or her point of view. Stewart and Logan (2002) discuss three competencies to developing empathetic listening: focusing, encouraging, and reflecting skills.

Focusing Skills

Focusing skills, the first competency, entails being attentive to the client. In order to have these skills, the therapist must make appropriate eye contact, react responsively, and use proper posture that faces towards the client. The staff at the center use many of these same skills. When the speaking center staff is facilitating a consultation, whether it is with a group or individual, they maintain eye contact with the client(s) during the majority of the half hour or hour consultation. Sometimes during the client's speech the staff member must look down to write notes on the report form, but the client will be informed of this necessity so as to always feel validated even if direct eye contact is not being made. Regardless of whether the client is seeking feedback on a speech, watching a video-tape of themselves giving a presentation, or working on a certain aspect of their speech or public speaking in general, the staff use eye contact to make the client feel comfortable and appreciated.

Through their work at the center, the staff has learned the benefits of connecting with their audience and take the necessary measures to be attentive to their clients. Sometimes the staff members face difficult situations such as enforcing the "two day" policy for consultations (the need to schedule an appointment two days before a final in-class presentation). If a client comes in less than two days before his/her presentation, the staff can only go over tip sheets as time does not allow for them to do a regular in-depth consultation. For management this is sometimes difficult to enforce because of the innate desire of the staff to help others to their utmost potential. Other difficult situations a staff member may have to handle include a dysfunctional group with aggressive members or those who do not have a clear idea of what the class assignment entails, clients who want the staff to break the honor code and write their speeches for them, or conversing with faculty members regarding the scheduling of a requested workshop for a time frame that is not feasible or during a week that is already booked. The staff does not usually have to deal with such challenging situations but must always be prepared to handle all communication in a responsible and friendly manner, sometimes reacting responsibly means suggesting that the client visit another organization on campus such as the Speech and Hearing Center, Psychological Services, or Disability Services to receive even more specialized assistance. Serving in the role as peer tutors, the staff must know their own limits for helping others and listen carefully to make the necessary referrals.

In being attentive to the client, the staff is cognizant of their word choices, especially in challenging situations, to ensure that they are constructive yet assertive, and to employ "I" language and not "you" language. When providing constructive criticism to a client, the staff

does so in a teaching manner so as not to embarrass the client or make him/her feel worthless. The staff acknowledges each client's existence and focuses on the inappropriate action rather than on the person. During consultations, the staff sits at the same table(s) as their clients and they use an open posture in which they face the client during the entire consultation beginning with the filling out of the top of the report form asking for basic demographic information, through the end of the consultation. At the close of every consultation the clients are given the opportunity to fill out feedback forms for each of their consultations. These forms are carefully considered and used for midterm staff reviews.

Encouraging Skills

Encouraging skills, Stewart and Logan's second competency, involves motivating the client to talk more. In order to motivate the client, the therapist can mirror, or repeat, the client's words in order to encourage more elaboration on a given topic. The therapist can also ask clarifying and open questions that require more than a yes/no response. By listening actively, a person demonstrates interest in what the talker is saying. This sets into motion a supportive chain in which the talker feels more accepted and can be more open. This, in turn, allows the talker to give more valid information that enables the listener to ask relevant questions (Burley-Allen, 1995).

Clients come into the center with a varying level of understanding of public speaking, group, and interpersonal communication as well as the details of the assignment for which they are using the services of the center. Sometimes the clients come in with a copy of their class assignment which makes it easier for the staff to more effectively assist their clients but many times they must motivate their client 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 their clients - do 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's interests more, or organizing their speech so there is a distinct introduction, body, and conclusion? Careful listening can help the staff determine what questions to ask to clearly understand the client's purpose for using the center's services.

Reflecting Skills

Reflecting skills, the final competency, entails reflecting on the client's perspective. The therapist can accomplish this competency through paraphrasing the client's words and/or adding an example that the therapist believes illustrates the client's perspective. The staff is careful to paraphrase each client's feelings and concerns in an effort to fully understand what is going on. The junior staff, who are in the training class to become consultants, spend class time reflecting on their experiences of shadowing the consulting staff working in the center. These verbal and written reflections are used to plan for future course discussions and learning opportunities. People may feel more empowered by talking rather than listening, but the listener is actually the one controlling the conversation. To listen effectively and be in control of what is being said, one must check understanding regularly by summarizing what the other has said. Then, wait for feedback - either confirmation that your understanding is correct or clarification of what the speaker intended. The staff follows this model during all consultations and communication

exchanges with each other and with their clients. While paraphrasing, the staff members make sure that external and internal distractions do not get in the way and that they are able to paraphrase in a non-evaluative way both the content and the feelings of the speaker and accurately interpret their understanding of the content and feelings they've heard (Ender & Newton, 2000).

In addition to empathetic listening, the staff utilizes empathetic understanding, which is 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're delivering (Ender & Newton, 2000). If a person/client thinks you're truly listening and understanding them and their unique world, then you'll help them to develop better personal understanding. Again, the staff members strive to develop personal understanding in addition to helping their clients. Through practicing empathetic listening, the therapist (staff member) will be able to develop a relationship with the client, and ultimately, help the client with his or her problem/need.

As demonstrated in this article, the relationship between therapist and client directly correlates to the relationship between the University Speaking Center staff and their clients. The University Speaking Center staff not only help their clients with their speaking endeavors, but they build relationships with each client through confirmation, unconditional positive regard, and empathetic listening. In terms of confirmation, the staff confirms their clients as speakers through encouraging and motivating language. Moreover, they listen empathetically as the client expresses fears and frustrations related to oral communication skills and competencies.

Skillful listening develops the information, insight, and understanding needed to deal with people effectively and to successfully manage an organization (Burley-Allen, 1995). Many people have found the empathetic approach to listening to be a powerful tool for improving people skills. Some payoffs have been increased sales, improved ability to sell ideas to management, improved ability to handle emotional people, more effective interviews, and improved working relationships (Burley-Allen, 1995). Empathetic listening can be used to solve problems of other people, reduce tension, facilitate cooperation, promote communication, develop an active mind, and enhance self-concept. True listening assumes that other people have worth, dignity, and something to offer. This attitude makes others feel good about themselves.

Future Speaking Center Research Focus Areas with Empathetic Listening

This article suggests that more empathetic listening leads to more success in the center. This center's success is being measured by three variables: client feedback, an increase in the volume of consultations completed, and a recent increase in allocation of resources from the university's administration. Although these concepts have been studied in a therapist/client context, they can be applied to the staff/client relationship found in a center or lab as well as other organizations. This article has implications for the day-to-day interaction between peer staff and their clients at all student-run campus organizations. Our analysis suggests that unconditional positive regard, confirmation, and empathetic listening are the root to maintaining the health of such tutoring situations.

Further research could examine the relationship between unconditional positive regard, confirmation, and empathetic listening and job satisfaction, leadership success, and/or job performance in peer-to-peer learning communities. Moreover, one might seek to determine if there is a connection between organizational communication and unconditional positive regard, confirmation, and empathetic listening and job performance, productivity and staff turn over at speaking centers and labs across the country.

Speaking centers and labs are positioned well to make significant contributions to the listening literature. Just as many centers and labs have naturally focused on communication apprehension (CA) as a way to get the attention and interest of prospective clients, listening could offer a similar allure. Centers and labs could strategically make listening a hot skill that people could gain by making an appointment for support. Just as is the case with CA, prospective clients would have to be given the opportunity to admit or realize that they need help in the area of listening in a non-threatening manner. Centers could create interactive activities that allow for self-assessment in private, safe environments. Staff members in training could be given a listening self assessment at the start of their formal training. The same self assessment could then be distributed at the end of their training. As with CA activities, center-led listening activities could allow prospective clients additional aid in building their listening skills at the center or lab. These activities in turn could be published in academic teaching sources.

Many centers and labs collect basic data from their clients at the start of a consultation. This data is often used to report to the administration. Centers and labs could easily add a listening question to that data which could contribute to the current listening research. The answer to a question like, "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 skill the clients might want to come back to work on in the future. Client feedback can include a question or two about the consultation experience from a listening perspective. An example of such a question could be, "Did your consultant's use of eye contact and posture contribute to your perception of their commitment to helping you?"

For centers and labs that concentrate solely on supporting public speaking skills, the area of active listening offers a multitude of research possibilities. Faculty across the curriculum 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 skills of active listening and audience affirmation would be a good position for these centers and labs to take. Speaking centers and labs can provide us with an amazing amount of data for research purposes. Though the potential in this area of research is clear, it remains to be seen whether listening will be the next area for centers and labs to take on.

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