**Unconditional positive regard, empathetic listening, and the impact of digital text driven communication**

By: [Kimberly Cuny](https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/clist.aspx?id=468)

Cuny, K. M. (2012). Unconditional positive regard, empathetic listening, and the impact of digital text driven communication. *International Journal of Listening*, (26) 79-82.

**\*\*\*© Taylor & Francis. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Taylor & Francis. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. \*\*\***

**This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *International Journal of Listening* on 5/21/12, available online:**[**http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/10904018.2012.677691**](http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/10904018.2012.677691)

**Abstract:**

Generally speaking, Generation N students are known to enjoy working in groups yet they often do not communicate effectively when measured by traditional expectations. This activity calls into question the impact that our daily nonvocal digital communicating has on our ability to empathetically listen.

**Keywords:** group work | students | digital communication

**Article:**

Generally speaking, Generation N students are known to enjoy working in groups yet they often do not communicate effectively when measured by traditional expectations. This activity calls into question the impact that our daily nonvocal digital communicating has on our ability to empathetically listen.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

After completing this activity, students will:

* Understand verbal behaviors of unconditional positive regard.
* Understand nonverbal behaviors of unconditional positive regard.
* Practice empathetic listening skills.

**PROCEDURAL DETAILS**

**Homework to be Done by Students Before the In-class Activity**

In teams of two, students are asked to have a meaningful conversation about how it is that they obtained their listening competencies, what they feel constitutes poor listening, and how it is they can tell when someone is really listening to them. These meaningful conversations are to take place for homework. These are not to be face-to-face encounters. They are instead to take place from a distance via nonoral, nonaural digital communication such as texting, instant messaging, e-mail, social media, and discussion boards. Students must be instructed to bring in hard copies (printed) of these digitally mediated conversations for use during the next class meeting.

**Preparation to be Done by Faculty Before In-class Activity**

Ensure that all students have a partner for the mediated homework assignment. Develop a 20–30 minute teaching module from the rationale offered here. Consider creating handouts for use during in-class activity. Create and photocopy assessment tool (optional).

**Facilitating In-class Activity**

Distribute any handouts developed and facilitate a 20–30 minute module on empathetic listening, unconditional positive regard, immediacy behaviors, and SOFTENS technique. Instruct students to use the paper artifact from their previous conversation as they work to reconstruct that digitally mediated conversation with the same partner. This time the conversation is to take place face-to-face. Each participant is to employ the verbal and nonverbal behaviors covered in class as they reexamine (through empathetic listening and unconditional positive regard) how it is that they obtained their listening competencies, what they feel constitutes poor listening, and how it is they can tell when someone is really listening to them.

**THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND/OR A BRIEF RATIONALE**

Generally speaking, Generation N students are known to enjoy working in groups. This suggests a need to communicate well. Often Gen N does not communicate effectively when measured by traditional expectations. This ineffective communication certainly includes empathetic listening competencies.

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, 1995Burley-Allen, M. 1995. *Listening: The forgotten skill: A self-teaching guide*, 2nd,New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.). Empathetic listening requires that the listener show both verbally and nonverbally that listening is truly taking place. Empathetic listening is an essential behavior when seeking to realize true unconditional positive regard.

Rogers (1992Rogers, C. R. 1992. The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology*, 60(6):827–832.) 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). Speakers can communicate unconditional positive regard for one another by increasing their use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Immediacy has been defined as “the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between people” (Richmond, 2002Richmond, V. P. 2002. “Teacher nonverbal immediacy: Uses and outcomes”. In *Communication for teachers*, Edited by: Chesebro, J. L. andMcCroskey, J. C. 65–80. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon., p. 68).

The use of immediacy behaviors in communicating unconditional positive regard can be examined in many ways. The focus here is on the use of face and eyes to increase perceived closeness, which can lead to a feeling of being positively cared for or about. Speakers who maintain comfortable eye contact and pleasing facial expressions during conversation communicate increased unconditional positive regard.

Verbal behaviors can also be used to demonstrate unconditional positive regard. In her essay, Wilde (2005Wilde, S. M. 2005. Helping students have more positive experiences in the classroom: Part 1. *The Successful Professor*, 1(4): 3–5.) 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. Listeners can use these same behaviors to express positive regard in conversation.

Listeners can also 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). WhileWassmer (1978Wassmer, A. C. 1978. *Making contact: A guide to overcoming shyness, making new relationships, and keeping those you already have*, New York, NY: Dial Press.) puts forth the SOFTENS technique for the initial stage of relationship forming, it extends throughout conversations. Body language is listed as one of the seven characteristics of effective listening, which also contributes to a sense of unconditional positive regard (Cobb, 2000Cobb, J. B. 2000. Listening within the social contexts of tutoring: Essential component of the mentoring relationship. *International Journal of Listening*, 14: 94–108.)

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 ongoing conversation, one might change “T” from touching by shaking hands to taking notes.

**APPROXIMATE TIME REQUIRED**

One class session of 50–75 minutes is needed.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| • | What are the common themes from your face-to-face conversations? |
| • | What might one learn about themselves as a result of this experience? |
| • | What role does technology play in our day-to-day listening behaviors? |
| • | How do these conclusions transfer to our working in groups of our peers? |
| • | What conclusions can we draw as a result of this activity? |
| • | What surprised you the most about this class assignment? |
| • | What are the strengths of this activity? |
| • | What are the weaknesses of this activity? |
| • | What are the limitations of an activity such as this? |
| • | How can this activity be changed to make it even better? |

**MATERIALS NEEDED**

Handouts and assessment tools (optional) are needed.

**ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING**

Students are given a final written assignment that is typically due at the start of the next class meeting. Questions include:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| • | What is the most important thing you learned as a result of this activity? |
| • | What questions about listening remain unanswered? |
| • | What changes will you make in your day-to-day interactions as a result of this activity? |

**REFERENCES**

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

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

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, MA: 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.

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

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