Illustrating Tensions Using Stretchy String: Teaching Relational Dialectics in the Interpersonal Communication Class

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this activity is to increase students’ knowledge of Relational Dialectics by illustrating dialectic tensions in a tangible way. Relational Dialectics, which focuses on different dimensions in relationships, is an important concept for students to understand because it highlights the messiness of interpersonal relationships. This activity illustrates dialectical tensions through the use of colored stretchy craft string, providing students with a physical manifestation of an abstract concept.

Description

The objective of this activity is to increase students’ knowledge of Relational Dialectics by illustrating dialectic tensions through the use of colored stretchy craft string. Each student is tethered to a partner with stretchy string while the instructor reads examples of real-life scenarios to the class. Students are asked to push the string toward their partners or pull the string away from their partners in order to illustrate the tension noted in each scenario. This activity provides students with a physical manifestation of the abstract concept of Relational Dialectics.

Approximate Time Required

For this activity, the instructor will need fifteen minutes of preparation time outside of class and twenty to thirty minutes of class time.

Courses

Introduction to Interpersonal Communication, Communication Theory, Small Group Communication, Advanced Interpersonal Communication

Materials Needed
The instructor will need to obtain three pieces of stretchy elastic craft string, each of a different color, for every two students. The instructor will also need several pairs of scissors and a list of scenarios (A starter list is provided as an appendix to this activity). Stretchy elastic craft string can be purchased at most craft stores.

Rationale

Good interpersonal communication skills enable us to communicate effectively with different people in different contexts. In order to allow students to understand how interpersonal communication occurs in the real world, instructors should illustrate interpersonal communication through a relationship that mirrors the complexity that exists in everyday life. The recognition of the intricacy of interpersonal relationships allows students to be more mindful in their daily communication. Relational Dialectics is one theoretical construct that addresses the complexity of such relationships.

Relational Dialectics draws attention to the complex contradictions and disagreements in relationships. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) articulated the understanding of relationships through “simple binary oppositions” such as “connection-autonomy,” “routine-novelty,” and “openness-privacy” (p. 43). Dialectic tensions are shared by individuals who are engaged in a particular relationship (Baxter, 2004), and they “involve the constant interconnection and reciprocal influence of multiple individual, interpersonal, and social factors” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 7).

Because different individuals think and behave differently, relationships are always in flux. Tensions differ by relationship and context. For example, two individuals may be friends, but one of them may favor openness in a particular situation, whereas the other may prefer privacy in the same situation. In a different situation, they may both prefer privacy. The complexity of their relationship becomes even more apparent when additional relationships are considered. For instance, Anna and Mary have been friends since high school. Besides her relationship with Mary, Anna has relationships with her family members, workplace colleagues and other friends and acquaintances. Dialectic tensions exist in each of her relationships. The dialectic tensions that occur between the different relationships in Anna’s life illustrate that interpersonal relationships are both complex and multi-faceted.

The complexity of Relational Dialectics is not an easy concept to illustrate merely through verbal explanation. It is with this realization that this class activity has been constructed. This activity serves to enhance students’ understanding of the complex concept of Relational Dialectics.

What to Do Before the Activity

To prepare for the activity, the instructor should cut three pieces of stretchy string for every two students. Each piece should be about a yard in length, and each of the three pieces should be a different color. The instructor should also prepare a list of scenarios to read to the
class. For example, one scenario might read: “Partner A and Partner B have just started dating. Both partners want to spend more time together.” A sample list of scenarios is provided at the end of this activity as an appendix.

During class, the instructor should teach Relational Dialectics to the class. It is important that the students understand the many different kinds of tensions that exist in every relationship. After explaining the theory to the class and reviewing the concept of tensions, the instructor should ask the students to pair up. After everyone has found a partner, the instructor should lead the class to the hallway or push the desks to the side of the room to provide the students with enough space to perform the activity.

What to Do During the Activity

The instructor should designate a Partner A and Partner B in each pair. This will eliminate some confusion later in the activity. Each pair should receive three pieces of different-colored stretchy string. The instructor should ask students to tie one end of each stretchy string to their wrists and ankle, so that the partners are tethered together in a “relationship.” After the students are tethered together, the instructor should advise them to stand about a yard away from their partner. This distance should be wide enough that the students can feel tension in the string.

The instructor must then tell the students which colored string represents which tension. For example, red may illustrate connection-autonomy, blue may illustrate routine-novelty, and green may illustrate openness-privacy. The instructor may wish to put up signs or write on the blackboard to remind students of the representation of each string. The instructor should also note which way to push or pull the string for each tension. Students should pull their strings away from each other if they disagree with their partner regarding a particular tension. For example, the students should tug the red string away from each other if one wants more connection in the relationship, but the other wants more autonomy.

Next, the instructor should read a scenario to the students. The students should be instructed to move their stretchy strings accordingly. For example, if the scenario suggests that both partners want more privacy in their relationship, both partners should push the green string toward one another. Multiple scenarios should be used to allow students to see how tensions arise from different situations.

What to Do After the Activity

Once all the scenarios have been read, the students should cut their strings to detach themselves from each other, and then return to their seats. The instructor should ask the students questions regarding how they felt about the tensions and the scenarios. Possible discussion questions include: “How did it feel when your partner wanted more privacy when you were happy with the way things were?,” “Did you find any of the scenarios uncomfortable to adjust
with the tensions?,” and “How could you tell when your partner wanted to change the relationship?”

Finally, it is crucial that the instructor remind the students that these are merely three of many tensions that exist in every relationship in our lives. It is also important that the instructor emphasize that every relationship has tensions. The instructor may ask the students to imagine that they are tethered to every person in their lives. These comments will illustrate the complexity of Relational Dialectics and allow the students to envision tensions in a more intricate way than the activity can physically illustrate.

Assessment

Generally, students appreciate this activity because it allows for activity-oriented learning as a break from the typical lecture/discussion format of many classes. Judging from verbal student feedback, we have found that this activity allows for students to clearly see how a complex theoretical concept works through a concrete example. Test scores suggest that this activity may increase their ability to remember these concepts as well.

Alternative Uses

In addition to using this activity for introductory level interpersonal communication classes, instructors of communication theory, small group communication, and advanced interpersonal communication classes may also find this activity useful. In communication theory classes, it can be used to introduce students to the theoretical construct of Relational Dialectics. Small group communication instructors may find this activity useful when illustrating the tensions found in dyads within specific groups. Furthermore, instructors of more advanced interpersonal communication classes may choose to expand this activity by allowing students to choose a maintenance strategy for the tensions and offering them a “toolbox” containing tape, scissors, additional string and other tools that could be used to illustrate tension maintenance through the stretchy strings.

For safety reasons, the instructor should have multiple pairs of scissors handy in case the students would need to leave the building in a hurry.

References


**Suggested Readings**


**Appendix: List of Scenarios**

1. Partner A and Partner B have just started dating. Both partners want to spend more time together.
2. Partner A and Partner B have been dating for a long period of time. Partner B wants to become engaged to Partner A, but Partner A is happy with the current status of the relationship.
3. Partner A and Partner B have been dating for several months. Partner A wants to know that the relationship has a future, and wants to spend more time with Partner B. Partner B is happy with the way things are.
4. Partner A and Partner B are dating. Both partners feel that there are certain secrets that they don’t want to share with one another. When Partner B decides to break the rule and share one of his/her secrets, Partner A feels uncomfortable and begins to spend less time with Partner B. Realizing that something is wrong, Partner B wants to spend more time with Partner A in order to solve the problem.
5. Partner A and Partner B are dating. Both partners agree not to talk about past relationships.
6. Partners A and B have been dating for a while. Both partners miss the spontaneity that existed when their relationship was new.
7. Partner A and Partner B are friends. While Partner A is very popular and has a lot of friends, Partner B only has a few friends. Partner B becomes jealous when Partner A spends time with his/her other friends. This causes Partner A to want to spend less time with Partner B.
8. Partner A and Partner B are friends. Partner A feels very close to Partner B, but wishes they would do more spontaneous activities together. Partner B feels that he/she can always count on Partner B, but that Partner B can be too dependent at times.
9. Partners A and B are dating. As both partners begin to share more about themselves, Partner B becomes embarrassed of a mistake he/she made in the past, and is afraid that if he/she shares it with Partner A, Partner A will no longer want to continue the relationship. Partner A, unaware of Partner B’s struggle, is happy that the relationship is becoming more open.
10. Partner A and Partner B are married. Partner A would like to start a family. Partner B enjoys the way things are currently, and wants to postpone starting a family for a few years.