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TEACHERS' WORKBOOK

The Art of Making Conversation: Learning the Skills Small Talk

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Abstract

Although “small talk” is often dismissed as trifling and superficial communication, the ability to converse comfortably with potential relational partners in initial interpersonal encounters is foundational to building closer relationships. In this assignment, students enhance their interpersonal communication competence through the application of six small talk guidelines in two peer-to-peer conversations and in a capstone conversation with the instructor one-on-one. This assignment is appropriate for a variety of communication courses, including the basic course, interpersonal communication, and courses in professional communication, as it develops students’ skills in active listening, self-disclosure, nonverbal immediacy, and anxiety/uncertainty management in interpersonal communication with strangers.

Concepts

Active Listening, Relationship Initiation, Nonverbal Immediacy, Self-Disclosure, Uncertainty Reduction Theory, Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory, Interpersonal Communication Competence

Courses

Interpersonal Communication, Communication Basic Course, Business and Professional Speaking, Communication in Interviewing, Intergroup Communication

Learning Objectives

- 1) Students will understand and be able to identify the six small talk guidelines for improving one’s competence at small talk.
- 2) Students will be able to use the small talk guidelines to provide peer-to-peer feedback to their small talk conversational partners.
- 3) Students will demonstrate mastery in their small talk communication skills through a process of trial and feedback from their peers and the instructor.

Rationale

With the exception of our earliest relationships with primary caregivers, all of our interpersonal relationships begin with an initial communication encounter in which we decide whether we are interested in getting to know someone better. In this crucial first encounter we rely heavily on social norms, which include exchanging factual, non-opinionated, and relatively superficial information (Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck, & Schulman, 1976; Knapp, 1978), and avoiding the disclosure of our deep, personal feelings about sensitive topics (Rosenfeld, 1979). Thus, in general, our first encounters with a potential relational partner center around safe topics of general interest that have little personal and emotional significance. As DeFleur et al. (2005) observed, while these conversations are often perceived as trivial, they are a complex and crucial part of establishing a closer relationship. Without the foundation of information provided in these initial encounters, there would be nothing upon which to build future intimate knowledge. In fact, Knapp (1978) observed that so-called “small talk” is so important in establishing a relationship, that it should be called “big talk.”

DeFleur et al. (2005) identified six communication skills that can facilitate competent communication in initial interpersonal encounters. Interpersonal communication competence refers to “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately” (Wood, 2013, p. 30). Whereas effectiveness involves accomplishing the goals we have for specific interactions, appropriateness means that we have adapted our communication behaviors to particular situations and people (Wood, 2013). Helping students to develop their abilities to effectively and appropriately engage in initial encounters with potential relational partners is an important facet of building their overall interpersonal communication competence. Although little research to date has specifically addressed verbal and nonverbal skills that comprise successful small talk, DeFleur and colleagues (2005) have identified a list of useful guidelines for evaluating and improving individuals’ small talk skills.

Maintain Eye Contact

In Western cultures, maintaining eye contact not only signals awareness of the other person, it also communicates cognitive and emotional availability. Studies of nonverbal listening behavior in Western cultures have consistently identified eye contact and forward body lean (a marker of nonverbal immediacy) as two of the most important indicators of interpersonal attraction (Clare, Wiggins, & Itkin, 1975). Most Westerners appreciate it when someone takes an interest in what they are saying, and eye contact serves as an important nonverbal cue signaling interest (DeFleur et al., 2005). Likewise, breaking eye contact with a conversational partner to focus on something else (e.g., a text message or a friend walking by) can communicate disinterest in the conversation and/or the person with whom one is conversing. Although the amount of eye contact and direction of gaze that is appropriate varies culturally, generally speaking, in a Western communication context, competent communicators should strive to make eye contact with their conversational partners 50-70 percent of the time (Stewart, Zediker, & Wittenborn, 2009).

Display Nonverbal Immediacy

Other nonverbal behaviors can communicate interest as well. Nonverbal immediacy refers to a combination of nonverbal behaviors that contribute to perceptions of liking and closeness (Mehrabian, 1981). Head-nodding, leaning forward, smiling, making eye contact, moving one’s eyebrows, shrugging, using open gestures, and orienting one’s body toward the conversa-

tional partner all signal interest in the other person and involvement in what s/he is communicating (DeFleur et al., 2005; Mehrabian, 1981). Nonverbal immediacy cues communicate to the other person that s/he is being listened to; they also facilitate one's own ability to listen mindfully and attentively to others. Stewart et al. (2009) observed that we are not fully involved in what we are hearing until our body registers our involvement; since body and mind are intimately connected, the kinesthetic sensations of conversational involvement actually help keep one's mind focused on listening.

Moreover, "immediacy often begets immediacy" (DeFleur et al., 2005, p. 89), that is, when we are nonverbally immediate toward others, the probability is high that they will respond in kind. This is because when people are nonverbally immediate toward us, we often assume that they like us. When we feel someone likes us, approves of us, and enjoys being with us, we feel inclined to reciprocate those feelings (DeFleur et al., 2005).

Remember and Use the Other Person's Name

Our names are an important and highly personal piece of information about us as individuals. As such, the significance of the other person is diminished if one cannot remember his/her partner's name. Our name is often the first piece of information we disclose about ourselves, and people become offended when we misspell, mispronounce, or forget their names (DeFleur et al., 2005). As such, an essential small talk skill is to develop one's ability to remember the names of others. There are several strategies available for instructors to share with their students, such as rehearsing the name several times mentally, using it right away in the conversation, and writing it down (DeFleur et al., 2005).

Draw Out the Other Person

A key small talk skill for improving one's competence in initial encounters is encouraging others to talk about themselves. DeFleur and colleagues (2005) recommended that individuals seeking to become stronger communicators capitalize on the fact that people are most comfortable talking about their own experiences and observations. By asking one's conversational partner general-interest questions and then engaging in active listening behaviors (e.g., nonverbal immediacy, paraphrasing to clarify meaning, asking relevant follow up questions), an individual communicates interest in the other person; in turn, good listeners are liked more and rated as more attractive (Argyle & Cook, 1976) and trustworthy (Mechanic & Meyer, 2000). Despite widespread recognition of listening's importance to communication competence, evidence suggests that educators have "spent a disproportionate amount of time teaching speaking as opposed to teaching listening" (Janusik, 2010, p. 193). This assignment provides students an opportunity to improve their listening skills.

Keep It Light

Since the goal of small talk is to begin the process of gradually building the trust necessary for greater levels of self-disclosure, DeFleur and colleagues (2005) observed that it is important to avoid plunging too quickly into controversial topics that threaten the comfort level of the other person. With respect to this guideline, asking conversational partners about their deep-seated political or religious views would be as inappropriate as disclosing intensely personal information about oneself. In Western cultural contexts, hobbies, occupations, sports, school, a shared event, and the weather, for instance, are generally considered to be comfortable areas of self-disclosure for individuals who have only just met (Johnson, 2009).

Accentuate the Positive

Generally, we are more attracted to people who have a positive outlook, and even minor complaints—the weather is terrible, the professor is unfair, there is too much homework—are perceived as conversation “downers” in initial encounters. Specifically, commenting negatively on classmates or a mutual acquaintance can lead a conversation to quickly devolve into an uncomfortable, if not disagreeable, conversation if the other person likes or respects those individuals (DeFleur, et al., 2005). Instead, one should adopt an optimistic tone in initial encounters—all this rain is good for the farmers, the professor is interesting, this class is stretching your mind—that highlights the positive attributes of others and the bright side of situations.

Time and Materials

This assignment is designed to be conducted in three sessions at three separate times during a semester. The amount of time between sessions is not important, as long as students have time to receive and review their peer feedback between sessions. The in-class portion of the assignment takes approximately 30 minutes on two separate class days. Each student will need a copy of the small talk grading rubric on both days 1 and 2 of the in-class peer sessions (see Appendix A). The third small talk session is conducted individually with the instructor outside of class and using the same grading rubric. Each individual student-instructor session takes approximately 10-15 minutes. If there are too many students in the course for a one-on-one conversation with each student to be feasible, the assignment has successfully been modified to accommodate an instructor meeting with two students at a time. Although the final small talk session with the instructor is not an absolute necessity, experience has shown that this further motivates students to seriously practice their small talk skills in the peer sessions leading up to the “oral final exam” with the instructor.

Assignment Directions

This assignment is most effective when students are exposed to the small talk guidelines and the grading rubric prior to the first day of class in which a small talk session is conducted. The instructor should lecture and/or lead a class discussion addressing each of the six small talk skills identified by DeFleur, et al. (2005). Film clips depicting characters skillfully or poorly using small talk in initial encounters can help further clarify the guidelines by providing concrete illustrations. Jacob Palmer (Ryan Gosling) in the film *Crazy Stupid Love* (Brown, et al., 2011), for example, provides a good illustration of someone who successfully employs several of the small talk guidelines to initiate relationships (e.g., use the other person’s name, draw out the other person, maintain eye contact, display nonverbal immediacy). Using this illustration and similar others also affords the instructor the opportunity to address communication ethics in initiating relationships. The instructor should encourage students to consider what kinds of general topics might be relevant to talk about with a classmate whom they do not know. In addition, students should be encouraged to anticipate which skills they may have the most difficulty with: For example, eye contact is automatic for many students socialized in the norms of the dominant U.S. cultural milieu, but most students find it awkward to use each other’s names. Anticipating these challenges in advance allows students to focus their attention on mastering the skills that may come less “automatically” to them while in-the-moment of the conversation itself.

On the day of the first small talk session, the instructor randomly assigns all students present to conversation dyads. If there are an odd number of students, assign one group of three students. Hand out a copy of the small talk grading rubric to all students and tell each dyad to select which person will be the lead conversationalist first. The other person will be the conversational partner/evaluator. The lead conversationalist is in charge of directing the conversation while using the small talk guidelines, and the conversational partner serves as both an engaged participant in the conversation, as well as the small talk evaluator. Direct the students to begin their conversation and let them visit uninterrupted for 10 minutes. During this time, the conversational partner/evaluator should not be writing comments, but should be making mental note of what the lead conversationalist is doing well and where s/he could improve.

After 10 minutes has passed, the instructor interrupts the conversation dyads and instructs all lead conversationalists to step outside the room until retrieved by the instructor. Provide the conversational partners/evaluators a few minutes to record their feedback on the small talk grading rubric while the conversation is still fresh in their minds. As evaluators are finishing up their notes, engage them in a brief discussion as to how things are going and what they are noticing. Invite the lead conversationalists for round one of the small talk session back into the classroom, have partners switch roles (conversational partner/evaluator becomes lead conversationalist and vice versa), and direct the students to begin round two of the conversation. Allow the dyads to visit for 10 minutes, and then ask the second-round of lead conversationalists to exit the room as the second-round partners/evaluators complete the small talk grading rubric for their partners. As the second-round evaluators are finishing up their notes, engage them in a brief discussion about what kinds of things they are noticing in the conversations that work well and what things are uncomfortable. Bring all students back into the classroom for a large group debriefing. More on the debriefing session is provided in the subsequent section.

Students type up their feedback on their partner's performance as lead conversationalist in paragraph form using the concepts from the rubric (1-1.5 pages double spaced). Students should be encouraged to be honest and constructive, and they should address their comments directly to their partners. The feedback can be emailed to the partner as an attachment and carbon copied (cc) to the instructor. Students should receive timely feedback from both their peer evaluator and the instructor on ways they can improve their small talk skills for the next session.

Follow the same procedures described above for the second in-class small talk session, randomly assigning conversation dyads on the day of the activity and ensuring that no one is in the same dyad as before. If a group of three is necessary due to an odd number of students, instruct the triad to have co-lead conversationalists for one round. These co-lead conversationalists should each receive feedback from the single evaluator, and as co-evaluators in the second round, they should each provide independent feedback to the single lead conversationalist.

For the final small talk session, the instructor makes a sign-up sheet available for students to arrange an appointment to meet with the instructor. Some students initially find the idea of this session intimidating, but experience has shown that the final session is actually quite pleasant for both the student and the instructor. In this session, the student is the lead conversationalist, and it is the student's responsibility to demonstrate his/her small talk skills by engaging the instructor in conversation. Time limits can be less strict, but both partners will need to be mindful of each other's busy schedules and try to keep the conversation to 10-15 minutes. Immediately following the student's departure, the instructor should complete his/her feedback for the student using the same grading rubric used in the peer-to-peer sessions.

Debriefing and Discussion

Following each of the two in-class small talk sessions, the instructor should invite students to regroup as a class and discuss the challenges they encountered and the successes they experienced in their roles as lead conversationalist and as conversational partner/evaluator. To help guide the discussion, students can be asked to share their thoughts/experiences on the following questions:

- 1) What is something interesting that you learned about your conversational partner? Did you learn this thing about him/her when you were leading the discussion or when s/he was leading the discussion?
- 2) What interesting question(s) did the lead conversationalist ask you when you were the conversational partner?
- 3) What skill(s) did you find the most difficult to consistently use? Why?
- 4) What skill(s) did you feel came most naturally to you? Why?
- 5) What kinds of general topics did you and your conversational partner discuss?
- 6) How might you prepare differently for engaging in small talk if you knew that you were going to have to talk to strangers at your boyfriend/girlfriend's sister's wedding (e.g., how might your general topics of conversation be different)? What about for small talk at a job interview?
- 7) Which of the guidelines for small talk do you think might carry over to the next stage of relational development, helping to deepen an interpersonal relationship?

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Appendix A: Small Talk Grading Rubric

Directions: Mark each item that your partner successfully uses in conversation. In the spaces labeled "comments" provide detailed feedback to your partner on your observations of his/her communication.

Maintain Eye Contact

_____ Maintains eye contact the recommended 50-70% of the time (not too much, not too little eye contact)

Comments:

Display Nonverbal Immediacy

- _____ Smiling or neutral, not scowling or constantly neutral (indifferent)
- _____ Positions his/her body toward you
- _____ Leans in and/or positions body in an "open" way (arms not crossed, etc.)
- _____ Artifacts (e.g., cell phone, books, iPod, clothing) not distracting him or her from listening to you
- _____ Head movement present and appropriate (nodding, shaking head)
- _____ Responds with encouragers (e.g., "uh huh," "I see")
- _____ Facial expressions appropriate (e.g., raised eyebrows [surprise], head tilted and/or brow furrowed [inquisitive])

Comments:

Remember and Use the Other Person's Name

_____ S/he used your name (correctly) at least two (2) times during the conversation.

Comments:

Draw Out the Other Person

- _____ S/he asks questions that encourage you to talk about yourself.
- _____ S/he asks relevant follow-up questions that show s/he is listening carefully and is inter-

_____ ested in what you are saying.

_____ Not an inquisition: s/he mixes relevant self-disclosures about him- or herself into the conversation

Comments:

Keep It Light

_____ S/he sticks to topics of general/situational interest; avoids "uncomfortable" topics like political or religious views, opinions about the instructor or others in the class, etc.

Comments:

Accentuate the Positive

_____ S/he avoids discussions about things or people s/he dislikes or is critical of.

Comments: