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Teaching Healthy Communication Skills for College Students with Disabilities

Molly Ann McShane

A Capstone Project for The Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

Introduction

For college students with disabilities, interpersonal communication can be difficult. There have not been sufficient supportive services for college students with disabilities when it comes to learning communication skills in a college environment. Without effective communication skills, college students with disabilities may face social barriers and fewer chances for personal connections, which may lead to social isolation. In order to address this issue, I planned to create a 2-hour lesson for members of the Student Awareness for Disability Empowerment club (S.A.D.E) at California State University, Monterey Bay.

Need Statement

Many college students with disabilities struggle to express and understand situations that involve different emotions, body language, and social cues from their peers. This miscommunication can be challenging to understand for many students. As a consequence, they may not be able to communicate with their classmates, peers, and/or roommates effectively and efficiently. Poor communication skills may also lead to social isolation and high anxiety.

Effective and healthy communication skills contribute to academic success as well as successful peer relationships, inside and outside of the classroom. University of Washington (2012) helps support this by stating how the importance of healthy and effective communication with faculty members, professors, and students can have a direct impact on the success of students when it comes to social interaction and academics. According to Sabbah et al. (2020), Communication is defined as a process that involves different styles of interaction and discussion between two or more people. There is also always a sender and the receiver. The goal and main

purpose of communication is to express and effectively communicate the thoughts and beliefs from one individual to another. Strong Communication consists of knowing how to appropriately respond to a peer's question or story. Another example of effective communication is knowing how and when to ask for help or answer a question from a professor or peer. (Pearson et al., 2017)

According to Sabbah et al. (2020), unhealthy and poor communication can cause many difficulties when it comes to talking with peers and forming important social connections. The birth of communication-related problems is directly related to speech, language, and hearing. Students may have trouble asking for help and asking for additional time or instructions from professors and peers. Willkomm (2018) discusses how bad communication consists of not having an open ear and not actively listening to a professor or peer. Another example that Willkomm (2018) discusses is how a lack of trust can make conversations difficult to process and create a response. Lastly, he discusses how everyone has different communication styles as some people are very direct with their thoughts while others prefer a more indirect approach to communication. Both Sabbah et al. (2020) and Willkomm (2018) bring up interesting points of how poor or bad communication can lead to difficulties in college socialization with peers and instructors.

If proper and healthy communication is not supported and taught, the consequences of poor or unhealthy communication could be detrimental for an incoming freshman with disabilities. Every college student has a different experience attending school, but for students with disabilities, it may be harder due to the lack of knowledge when it comes to proper

communication and techniques. Pearson et al. (2017) mentions how poor communication can make it difficult for students to process information, verbal and written, as well as the inability to focus during a conversation and create a response. This can cause confusion and can lead to anxiety for students with disabilities as they don't know how to respond or act.

Many college students with disabilities may have poor social skills as they struggle to communicate effectively with their professors, classmates, and even roommates. They struggle to ask for help or follow social norms and cues. Chris Segrin from the head of the UA Department of Communication, notes that because of this, these college individuals with poor social communication experience more stress and loneliness, compared to other individuals within the college community, which can negatively impact the student's mental health" (Segrin, 2017). According to Liu (2018), when students experience more stress due to poor communication, students are more likely to experience and show distress. Liu (2018) states that this kind of behavior will make them less likely to develop and use natural coping strategies to help calm their mind down from a situation with a peer.

Although asking for help and learning proper communication may not be an easy road to take for many students with disabilities, it is an important and necessary one. This path can lead to effective and good communication in their everyday college experience and in life as a whole. Fleming et al. (2017) mentions how students with a stronger sense of self and belonging, because of proper communication, are more likely to succeed and be happy. This is due to the fact that they have developed a stronger sense of self-advocacy and have an improved perception of peer-to-peer interactions. An important approach to healthy communication, mentioned by

Joseph et al. (2020), is being able to implement active listening. With this, she mentions how students will be able to better connect, listen and communicate with other peers. This will not only clear any misgivings or confusion, but students will be able to focus on the subject instead of trying to think of a response. Active listening may also help individuals become more sensitive and empathetic towards their peers as they have a better understanding of what their friend is dealing with according to Joseph et al. (2020).

In study done by Ashbough et al. (2017) focuses on social skills training and how beneficial teaching proper healthy communication can be for a student with disabilities. Each week, participants received training in many different social skills-related topics. They stated these examples; “How to meet people by appropriately introducing oneself, how to appropriately exchange contact information with peers (e.g., phone numbers), how to invite peers to attend events, appropriate topics of conversation, how to ask questions to peers, and appropriate ways to say “goodbye” when an activity is finish” (Ashbough et al., 2020). These techniques were found to be very effective. Asbough et al. (2020) found that all three participants increased their social and communicative abilities, had stronger peer interactions, and were overall happy with their college experience on campus with peers.

With the proper teaching of healthy and effective communication, college students with disabilities will feel more confident, be able to communicate better with peers, and will be able to experience a more full and eventful college experience as well as succeed in their academics. With the right access to skill learning and healthy communication, Students with disabilities will see a positive shift in becoming better listeners, becoming more empathetic, and will develop

better critical thinking skills. In order to help students with disabilities gain stronger communication skills, I created a two-day lesson for members of the Student Awareness for Disability Empowerment club (S.A.D.E) at California State University, Monterey Bay.

Development

Social and emotional development are crucial elements to an individual's growth and are essential for connecting with others. Pritchard and Wilson (2003) discuss how interpersonal relationships with peers are crucial for development and in turn, helps students manage their emotions, build stronger relationships, and feel empathy for others. Social and emotional development is important to learn at a young age as it allows us to solve problems and develop important friendships from the ground up. According to Pathways (2020), social and emotional growth and development occur at birth and continue to develop throughout adolescence. By age 5 and 6, children start to develop more complex ways of communicating and problem-solving. Pathway (2020) also states that children around this age learn to work conflicts out on their own, become more independent, can understand and are sensitive to their peer's feelings and emotions, and have more meaningful friendships. These skills are crucial to learning at a young age so that they can continue to grow emotionally, socially, and physically into their adulthood.

As children and adolescents grow, it is important for their social communication skills to grow as well. As these young adults begin the transition to community college, they may have not been given the correct tools or development to socialize in a large environment such as a college class or campus activity. According to Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994), for students with disabilities, a lack of teaching in proper healthy communication with peers can be difficult and

may lead to self-doubt, low self-esteem, anxiety due to a lack of proper communication techniques and abilities. These are all crucial things that need to be addressed early on in a college student's career as they develop crucial relationships with roommates, peers, and staff on campus. Strong and healthy social skills, as well as proper responses to questions and issues from peers, are crucial elements that need to be addressed in the college setting for freshman students with disabilities. These two elements will promote growth and strength in communication styles for students.

Consideration of Diversity

My project would be conducted with members of the Student Awareness for Disability Empowerment club (S.A.D.E) at California State University, Monterey Bay. This group does not reflect the majority of Freshman college students at CSUMB as this paper only focuses on CSUMB Freshmen with disabilities. According to College Factual's 2021 Diversity Analysis Demographics & Diversity Report, CSU Monterey Bay is 47.52% Hispanic, 25.65% White, 6.10% International, 5.70% Asian, 4.90% Multi-Ethnic, 3.39% Black or African American, and 0.41% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. From a demographic standpoint, I am only focusing on teaching incoming Freshman students. With that being said, any second-year students and up will not be represented in this study. I plan to focus my efforts only on students within the S.A.D.E. club. Therefore, my project cannot be generalized to the CSUMB student population as a whole.

Learning Outcomes

I intended to provide a two-hour lesson plan to Freshman-level students who are members of the Student Awareness for Disability Empowerment club (S.A.D.E) at California State University, Monterey Bay.

By the end of this project, participants will:

1. Identify healthy vs bad communication when talking to peers.
2. Indicate two ways that poor peer-to-peer communication may affect them or may happen.
3. Determine two better approaches to respond and act when communicating with peers.

Method

First, the instructor should get the presentation (see Appendix A), up on the projector and have it ready to go on the introduction slide. (Slide 1). Then introduce themselves to the class and explain why they are there as well as a basic explanation of what they will be going over and talking about during the 2-hour lesson. The educator should then proceed to begin the presentation by going over the first 3 slides, at a steady pace, discussing the basics of communication. The educator should keep an eye out for raised hands in case there are any questions that need clarifying. After the educator has gone over the first three slides, students will have had a basic explanation of communication and the different aspects of communication. The instructor should continue on to the 4th slide where it will prompt the students and instructor to complete the first activity/assignment. The instructor should then pass out the “Communication Survey” sheets (see Appendix B), to each student. The students should then be

prompted to fill out the front of the sheet labeled “Pre-Survey”. Give the students up to 5 minutes to complete the sheet and then instruct them to place it aside on their desk for later use.

Next, the presenter will continue with the presentation by going over the next 3 slides (Slides 6, 7, and 8), discussing more definitions and aspects of communication. The educator will then move on to slide 9 where the second activity, “Understanding Emotions”, will be implemented (see Appendix C). The instructor will then explain the objective and instructions of the 2nd activity and split the class into 2 big groups. Have the 2 groups stand at opposite ends of the classroom to complete this activity. The instructor should follow the step-by-step instructions located at the top of the “Understanding Emotions” worksheet. Give the students 25 to 30 minutes to complete the second activity and then have them all go back to their seats. Once the students have sat down, move on to slide 10 and lead the discussion questions located on the slide. Give the students a minute or two to look over the slide and think about an answer to the questions asked. Have the students answer the questions by raising their hand’s. Call on 2-3 students per discussion question. Once all the questions have been addressed and answered, continue on presenting the next 4 slides (Slides 11-14), discussing examples and consequences of poor and healthy communication.

After going over slide 14 (active listening), continue over to slide 15 where the third activity “Active Listening” awaits (see Appendix D). The instructor should then have all the students break up in pairs of 2 and have them sit together. The instructor should then explain the objective and instructions of the 3rd activity to the students located on the top of the “Active Listening” worksheet. Follow the step-by-step instructions located on the worksheet to complete

the activity efficiently. Give the students 25 to 35 minutes to complete the third activity and then have them all go back to their seats. Once the students have sat down, move on to slide 16 and lead the discussion questions located on the slide. Give the students a minute or two to look over the slide and think about an answer to the questions asked. Have the students answer the questions by raising their hands. Call on 2-3 students per discussion question. Once all the questions have been addressed and answered, continue on to the last slide (Slide 16).

The instructor should then ask the students if they have any final thoughts or questions. Give the students up to 3 minutes to ask any lingering questions or concerns they may have. Once there are no more questions, have the students flip over the “Communication Survey” sheet and fill out the backside of the paper (see Appendix F), labeled “Exit-Survey”. Give the students 5-10 minutes to complete the survey and have them bring it and leave it on the front desk for collection when finished where they will then receive a piece of candy before exiting the classroom.

Results

Not completed due to Covid-19.

Discussion

Not completed due to Covid-19.

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Appendix A: PowerPoint on Communication



What Is Communication?

- *The act of transferring different information from one place, person or group to another that involves a sender, a message and a recipient.*
- The transmission of the message from sender to recipient can be affected by a range of things such as:
 - Our emotions
 - The cultural situation
 - The medium used to communicate
 - Location



Pearson, J. C., Nelson, P. E., Titsworth, S., & Hosek, A. M. [2017]

Different Forms of Communication



Categories of communication:

- **Written Communication:** This includes social media, books, letters, e-mails, the Internet and other medias.
- **Verbal Communication:** This includes face-to-face interactions with peers.
- **Non-Verbal Communication:** This covers body language, gestures, how we dress and how we act.
- **Visualizations:** This Includes graphs and charts, maps, logos and other visualizations that can communicate different meanings and messages.

Pearson, J. C., Nelson, P. E., Titsworth, S., & Hosek, A. M. (2017)

What **Makes Up** Communication

- **Body Language**

Eye Contact and sit attentively to let know you are not only listening to but also hearing and understanding what they are talking about.

- **Listening**

listen carefully to what the individual has to say in order to formulate a response.

- **Confidence**

The key to getting heard by a group of people and understood.

- **Understanding Difference**

Being able to understand the difference between the various forms of communication and how to deal with each situation that arises.

Communication Survey (5min)

Why **Proper** Communication is Important



- Being able to effectively communicate is important as it ensures that you not only convey your message to an individual clearly but also display the proper feelings and emotions involved with your message.
- Communication is taught and learned by a child at a very young age, specifically their toddler years, but the most crucial time for a child to develop and enhance their communication skills is during their teenage years and early adulthood.

How Proper Emotions Help With Communication

Emotional expression is very important to live a healthy life. It allows us to export our feelings and thoughts and can prevent that fight-or-flight response related to poor emotion regulation.

It is important to understand others' emotions and our own so that we will be able to better connect, listen and communicate with others.

An example of how to properly deal with emotions:

- Identify the emotion you are feeling.
- Try your best to focus on the specific emotion besides why you are feeling that way. It may help to imagine a shape or color and focus on that.
- Take deep breaths and as you exhale, imagine that specific emotion melting away.
- Continue to do this until you feel relief. If you leave the story out of it, the relief should come quickly – five minutes or less.



Kids Health Behavioral Health (Ed.), (2021).

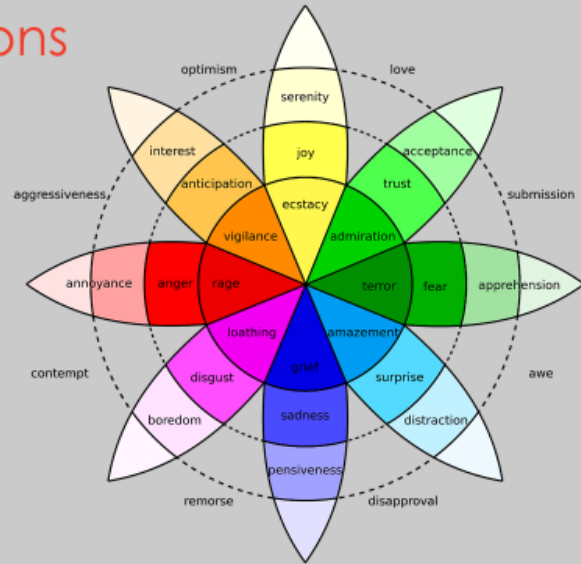
Importance of Emotions

Being able to properly express emotions is important as it can make verbal and nonverbal communication easier to understand.


When we fail to express our emotions properly, our brain can go into the fight-or-flight state. This is a physical reaction to stress that sets off a chain of events throughout our bodies. It increases our heart rate, slows digestive functions and makes us feel anxious or depressed.

Expressing and controlling emotions help us:

- Communicate more effectively
- Makes decision making and problem solving easier.
- Reduces anxiety and depression.
- Creates stronger and healthier active listening skills



Kids Health Behavioral Health (Ed.). (2021).



The graphic is a rectangular box with a light gray background and a thin gray border. It features two icons of a human head profile in silhouette, facing right. The interior of each head is filled with white circuit-like lines, representing neural activity or cognitive processes. The text "Activity Time!" is written in a large, blue, sans-serif font in the center. Below it, the text "Understanding Emotions (20-30min)" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

Activity Time!
Understanding Emotions (20-30min)

Emotion Activity Discussion

- What did you learn from this activity?
- Why are emotions important when it comes to proper communication?
- What are some better emotional approaches and responses when it comes communicating or listening to peers?
- Did their partners' body language communicate how they felt about what was being said?
- How did listeners feel about not being able to speak about their own views on the topic? How well were they able to keep an open mind? How well did they listen?



Kids Health Behavioral Health (Ed.), (2021).

Unhealthy Communication

- Communication-related problems are directly related to speech, language, and hearing.
- [Pearson et al. \(2017\)](#) mentions how poor communication can make it difficult for students to process information, verbal and written, as well as the inability to focus during a conversation and create a response. This can cause confusion and can lead to anxiety for students with disabilities as they don't know how to respond or act.
- [Willkomm \(2018\)](#) discusses is how a lack of trust can make conversations difficult to process and create a response. Lastly, he discusses how everyone has different communication styles as some people are very direct with their thoughts while others prefer a more indirect approach to communication.



Pearson et al. (2017), Willkomm (2018)

Unhealthy Communication Examples & Tips

- Constantly interrupting
 - Multitasking
 - Equating your experiences to others
 - Not sitting still
 - Avoiding direct contact
 - Waiting instead of listening
- Discuss what happened. Don't judge.
 - Don't jump to conclusions
 - Use 'I feel' statements, not 'You are' statements
 - Learn to understand each other, not to defeat each other.
 - Focus on the major problem, and don't get distracted by other minor problems.
 - Talk about the problems that hurt your feelings, don't hold them in.



Parenthood, P. (2021), Pearson, J. C., Nelson, P. E., Titsworth, S., & Hosek, A. M. (2017)

Healthy Communication Examples & Tips

- Strong Body Language, including posture.
- Strong eye contact.
- Facial expressions, excited, interested, sad.
- Ask appropriate questions, stay on topic.
- Keep an open Mind.
- Avoid “closed” questions that lead to yes/no or one-word answers.
- Don't interrupt the flow of presentations, lectures or conversations.



The Key to Proper Communication

Active Listening Is the Key


- Active listening is the practice of preparing to listen and observe what verbal and non-verbal messages are being sent back and forth, and then providing appropriate feedback and being able to show mindfulness to the thought being presented.

University of Washington (2012) states how the importance of healthy and effective communication with faculty members, professors, and students can have a direct impact on the success of students when it comes to social interaction, and academics.

Through active listening, students will be able to better connect, listen and communicate with other peers.

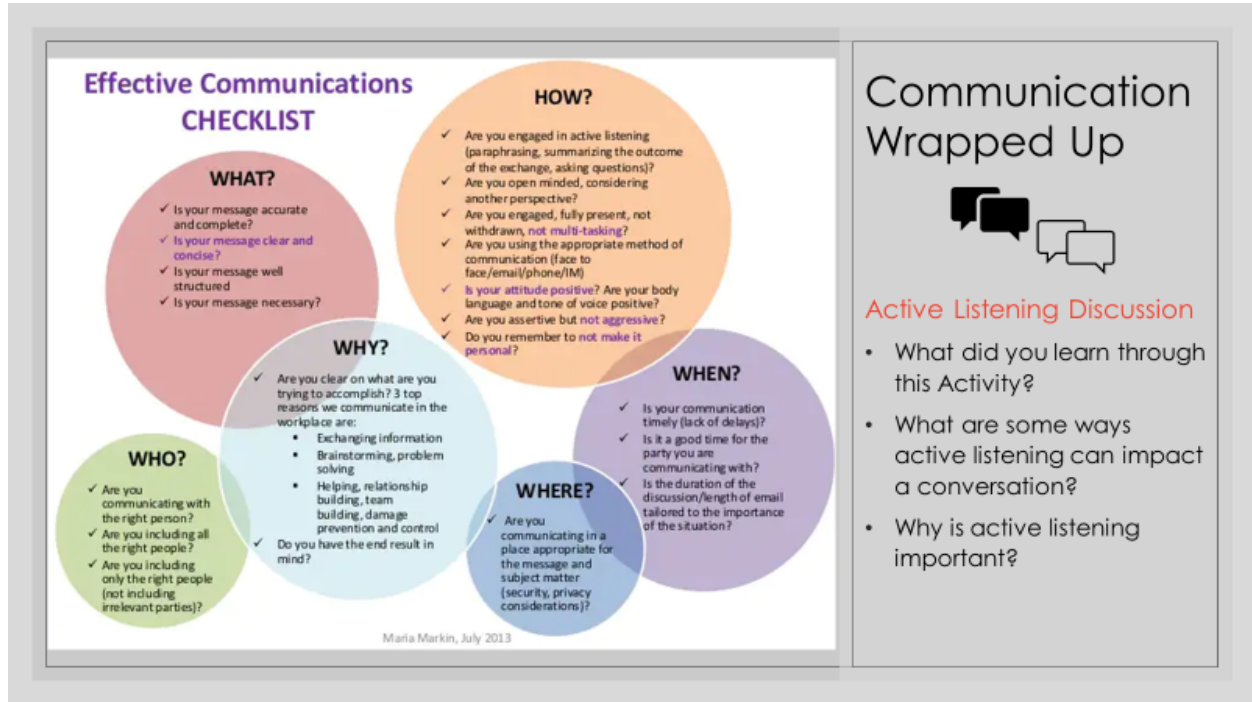


Pearson, J. C., Nelson, P. E., Tiltworth, S., & Hosek, A. M. (2017)



The graphic is a rectangular box with a light gray background and a thin gray border. It features two icons of a human head profile in silhouette, facing right. The interior of each head is filled with white circuit-like lines, representing a brain or cognitive process. The text "Activity Time!" is written in a large, blue, sans-serif font in the center. Below it, the text "Active Listening Activity(20-30min)" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

Activity Time!
Active Listening Activity(20-30min)



Effective Communications CHECKLIST

WHAT?

- ✓ Is your message accurate and complete?
- ✓ Is your message clear and concise?
- ✓ Is your message well structured?
- ✓ Is your message necessary?

HOW?

- ✓ Are you engaged in active listening (paraphrasing, summarizing the outcome of the exchange, asking questions)?
- ✓ Are you open minded, considering another perspective?
- ✓ Are you engaged, fully present, not withdrawn, not multi-tasking?
- ✓ Are you using the appropriate method of communication (face to face/email/phone/IM)?
- ✓ Is your attitude positive? Are your body language and tone of voice positive?
- ✓ Are you assertive but not aggressive?
- ✓ Do you remember to not make it personal?

WHY?

- ✓ Are you clear on what are you trying to accomplish? 3 top reasons we communicate in the workplace are:
 - Exchanging information
 - Brainstorming, problem solving
 - Helping, relationship building, team building, damage prevention and control
- ✓ Do you have the end result in mind?

WHO?

- ✓ Are you communicating with the right person?
- ✓ Are you including all the right people?
- ✓ Are you including only the right people (not including irrelevant parties)?

WHERE?


- ✓ Are you communicating in a place appropriate for the message and subject matter (security, privacy considerations)?

WHEN?

- ✓ Is your communication timely (lack of delays)?
- ✓ Is it a good time for the party you are communicating with?
- ✓ Is the duration of the discussion/length of email tailored to the importance of the situation?

Maria Markin, July 2013

Communication Wrapped Up



Active Listening Discussion

- What did you learn through this Activity?
- What are some ways active listening can impact a conversation?
- Why is active listening important?

Exit Survey and Final Thoughts

Thank You

Appendix B

Communication Survey

Pre-Survey

We communicate in a variety of contexts. To improve your skill as a communicator, you should assess your own communication skills in each of the general communication contexts so that you can identify your strengths and areas for growth.

Read each of the following questions carefully, and respond using the following scale:

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Indifferent 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree

- 1. I can use communication to solve conflicts with friends.
- 2. I am able to express my ideas clearly when working in a group.
- 3. I am comfortable when giving public speeches.
- 4. I can use the Internet to locate highly reputable information.
- 5. Other people tell me that I am a good speaker.
- 6. My friends tell me that I am a good listener.
- 7. Others listen to my opinions in group meetings.
- 8. People rely on me to find information on the web.
- 9. I am good at delivering speeches.
- 10. I can effectively lead groups to discuss problems.
- 11. I make friends easily.
- 12. I am skilled at using computers to communicate

Note: This list has no “right” or “wrong” answers. It simply provides an overview of your communication skills at the beginning of the course. You will complete the survey again at the end of the course to determine whether your scores have changed.

*If your overall average or response to any individual question is below 3, you may be lower in self-perceived communication competence. A score near 3 is average, and a score higher than 3 suggests that you perceive yourself higher in communication competence

<https://bowenstaff.bowen.edu.ng/lectureslides/1586878126.pdf> (Communication Skills in Context) For Pre and Exit Survey

Appendix C

Understanding Emotions Activity (25-30mins)

Objective:

The role of this game is to establish proper emotions via an act it out situation with a chosen feeling or emotion. Participants will become more aware of different emotions and feelings that aid with proper communication. Participants will be split into 2 teams to act out an emotion, such as disgust, affection, fear, anxiety, embarrassment, anger, determination. etc. and the other group will try to guess what that emotion is.

Directions:

1. Divide the class into two teams.
2. Place the packet of cards given in a box, each of which has a particular emotion typed on it.
3. Have a participant from Group 1 pick a card from the box and explain the emotion for his/her group. The group will have 2 minutes to decide how to present their emotion and 5 minutes to present to the class.
4. If the emotion is guessed correctly by Group 2, they will receive 5 points.
5. Next, have a participant from Group 2 choose a card and have them facilitate their group so that they may act out their emotion; award points as appropriate.
6. Rotate the acting opportunities between the two groups. Complete a minimum of 4 rotations or more.
7. After 20–30 minutes, call time and announce the winning team based on its point total.

Cards Labeled with Emotions:

- Surprised
- Sad
- Bored
- Happy
- Shy
- Excited
- Mad

Materials:

- Emotions Cards
- Timer
- Small Box/Container for cards

Appendix D

Active Listening Activity (25-35mins)

Objective:

This activity strengthens your team members' listening skills. Listening is an incredibly important part of good communication, and it's a skill that people often ignore in team activities. This activity also shows them how to listen with an open mind. This is an activity that encourages participants to communicate how they feel about a subject.

Directions:

1. Have the students group up in pairs of 2.
2. Give each pair 4 index cards with randomized specific topics.
3. One partner will blindly choose a card and then speak for three minutes on how they feel about the topic. As the first partner talks, the other person cannot speak – their goal is to listen.
4. After three minutes, the listener has one minute to recap on what their partner has said. They cannot debate, agree or disagree – only summarize.
5. Next, the roles switch, and the process starts again.

Cards Labeled with Topics:

- What's your favorite movie? Why?
- Where are you planning to go for your next vacation?
- What's your favorite band / singer?
- Are you a cat person or a dog person? Why?
- What are some current trends you just can't get behind?
- What actors or actresses only play one character in every movie they are in?
- What subjects were hardest for you in school?
- What app would you suggest everyone get?
- What's on the internet that you couldn't live without?
- What do you think would be the most useful thing you could do with virtual reality?
- Are you concerned about the rise of self-driving cars?
- What social media platform do you spend the most time on?

Materials:

- Topic Cards
- Timer

<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/team-building-communication.htm> (Just Listen*)

Appendix F

Communication Survey

Exit-Survey

We communicate in a variety of contexts. To improve your skill as a communicator, you should assess your own communication skills in each of the general communication contexts so that you can identify your strengths and areas for growth.

Read each of the following questions carefully, and respond using the following scale:

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Indifferent 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree

- 1. I can use communication to solve conflicts with friends.
- 2. I am able to express my ideas clearly when working in a group.
- 3. I am comfortable when giving public speeches.
- 4. I can use the Internet to locate highly reputable information.
- 5. Other people tell me that I am a good speaker.
- 6. My friends tell me that I am a good listener.
- 7. Others listen to my opinions in group meetings.
- 8. People rely on me to find information on the web.
- 9. I am good at delivering speeches.
- 10. I can effectively lead groups to discuss problems.
- 11. I make friends easily.
- 12. I am skilled at using computers to communicate

Note: This list has no “right” or “wrong” answers. It simply provides an overview of your communication skills at the beginning of the course. You will complete the survey again at the end of the course to determine whether your scores have changed.

*If your overall average or response to any individual question is below 3, you may be lower in self-perceived communication competence. A score near 3 is average, and a score higher than 3 suggests that you perceive yourself higher in communication competence.

1. Write down 2 ways an individual could be affected due to poor peer-to-peer communication?

2. Write down 2 healthy ways to respond and act when communicating with peers.
