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Q2S Enhanced Pedagogy: Developing Critical Listening Skills in Business School Students to Enhance On-The-Job Performance

Matthew Habich
mhabich@csusb.edu

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Q2S Enhanced Pedagogy: Developing Critical Listening Skills in Business School Students to Enhance On-The-Job Performance

Pedagogical Issue: How do we prioritize critical issues in our teaching?

A common complaint heard from many business managers and executives is that while recent business school graduates are relatively well-equipped for the technical aspects of their jobs, they often lack critical communication-related skills, thus limiting their organizational effectiveness. Business communication faculty are well aware of these perceptions, but often struggle to effectively prioritize and address all the “critical” skills needed in a rapidly evolving workplace within very limited classroom time. In a flipped classroom, learning at the Knowledge or Comprehension level (of Bloom’s Taxonomy) can often be effectively accomplished by the student outside of the classroom, but learning at the Application and skill practice level often require dedicating a substantial portion of precious classroom time.

Therefore, it’s extremely important to ensure that business communication instructors are prioritizing scarce classroom time to reinforcing those skills that are perceived by potential employers as the most important and / or most lacking in recent business school graduates. And once the highest priority skills have been identified, it’s necessary to employ highly effective classroom and / or homework activities that allow students to apply and practice these essential skills.

Project Description

This project consisted of two completed phases: 1) to collect primary market research regarding students’ communication skills and gaps to inform what are the most critical skill(s) to be taught in the classroom, and 2) to design at least one effective classroom or homework module that can help students apply and practice these skills in interaction with others. My future plans include implementing this module in the classroom and adjusting as indicated by student feedback and outcomes.

Primary Market Research: What do organizations find most lacking?

In order to better understand the perspective of the marketplace, I employed existing relationships with a number of high-level executives - representing some of the most desirable industries in the Los Angeles area - to solicit their views on what important communication skills graduates must possess for success in their workplaces, and their views on those skills which are most frequently lacking in job candidates and recent employees. I also triangulated this feedback with scholarly research on this topic.

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Executive Feedback: Good Listening Skills are Severely Lacking

Using these perspectives, it became clear that “Listening Skills” were one of the most critically important – and yet often most lacking – skills needed by successful employees, particularly those new to the workforce. For example, one executive from the shipping industry noted: “The biggest delta I experience in regards to effective communication, is listening skills. Listening to learn seems to be a lost art and source of frustration for leaders.”; another executive from the software sector responded that: “I think listening...really listening is a skill that everyone needs and is in short supply especially among the younger members of my team. An important subset of listening is receiving feedback well.” And similarly, another executive, from the advertising sector, observed that “Practicing undivided listening skills, not rushing the speaker, and not getting distracted by phone/computer” were among the most important skills graduates needed, in her estimation.

Classroom Activity: Practicing Listening Skills in the Classroom

A classroom activity was created to give each student direct experience practicing with, and observing these critical listening skills. This activity can be completed in no more than approximately 30-35 minutes, but can obviously be expanded if additional practice is desired and additional time is available.

This activity starts with the instructor presenting the foundation topics (Knowledge / Comprehension), proceeds to individual student practice (Application / Analysis), and completes with students sharing their experiences and learnings.

Introduction (approx. 10 minutes)

With the entire class, the instructor presents the importance of listening skills, barriers to effective listening and the use of active listening skills (5-10 minutes)

Each student spends two minutes thinking about a difficult or challenging time in their lives that they would be comfortable sharing - or alternatively a time that they felt particularly proud of an accomplishment (2 minutes).

Instructor divides class into groups of three.

Exercise (approx.15 minutes)

Students select one of three initial roles: Speaker, Listener, or Observer. Have students arrange their environment / workspace in such a way that they can focus on the Speaker.

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Step 1: (1 minute)

The Speaker describes in detail, for approximately one minute, their challenging or gratifying experience.

During this period, the Observer keeps time, and also observes the Listener's response to the story, noting any verbal or non-verbal feedback, eye contact or relevant body language. Does the listener *appear* to be listening?

During this time, the Listener employs active listening skills to attend to the narrative being told, asking brief questions as appropriate. They listen specifically for the principal theme of the narrative, as well as for deeper meaning, such as the emotions expressed, and "what wasn't said".

Step 2: (1 minute)

When the Speaker is done, The Listener takes one minute to paraphrase and reflect on the narrative that was conveyed. As the Listener, what did you hear? What emotions was the Speaker experiencing when telling the story? Did any questions come up for you in listening to the narrative? Lastly, what was it like to focus your attention entirely on one person for one minute?

Step 3: (30 seconds)

The Observer provides feedback on what he / she noticed in observing the Listener. Did the listener *appear* to be listening?

Step 4: (30 seconds)

The Speaker provides feedback. Did you feel heard? Did the listener understand the details and the essence of your experience? How did it *feel* to be listened to intently – even if only for a minute?

Step 5: Students change roles and repeat Steps 1- 4. (6 additional minutes)

Debrief: (approx. 10 minutes)

Instructor brings entire class back together, and asks each student to reflect on one thing that they learned from this exercise.

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List of Scholarly Readings

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