

3. TUTOR - STUDENT COMMUNICATION

Communication between tutor and student is an important tool for establishing the relationship, and also for achieving the goals that the student wishes to attain during the process. This chapter deals with the following content:

- methods of clear communication and active listening, as a basis for successful communicative dialogue;**
- tips on how to deal with challenging behaviour from a student, and ways of resolving communication and conflict issues.**

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3.1. Are you understanding each other properly?

The success of the relationship and joint cooperation between the tutor and student depends to a large extent on successful and effective communication. However, problems can easily arise here.

Why?

Each person is a world unto themselves. Not just a world – an entire universe! We are all born with certain abilities, and during our lives we gain a variety of experiences, values and knowledge, and sometimes we ask ourselves how we can understand each other at all given all these differences. This is backed up by the fact that only a third of what we say is properly understood.

What should you do?

Good, effective communication is vital for personal and professional success. It is a skill that you can learn. Its purpose is to communicate a message to another person, and it is very important here that the other person receives the information in the way the sender wished to give it. Effective communication therefore depends on clear communication on the one hand and active listening on the other hand.

In the process of communicating the sender encodes information and sends it to the recipient through a channel/medium. The recipient then decodes the message and responds to it (provides feedback to the sender). Communication is thus a process whereby we ascribe and transmit significance with the aim of creating common understanding. The process requires a wide selection of skills in the area of personal and interpersonal understanding, listening, observation, speaking, questioning, analysing and evaluating.

If you want to understand your interlocutor, you must decode their message. You can make this easier by asking questions:

- “If I understand correctly, you’re telling me that...”
- “This means that you feel...”
- “Does it seem to you that...”
- “This means for you...”
- “I have the feeling that...”

3.2. The power of non-verbal communication

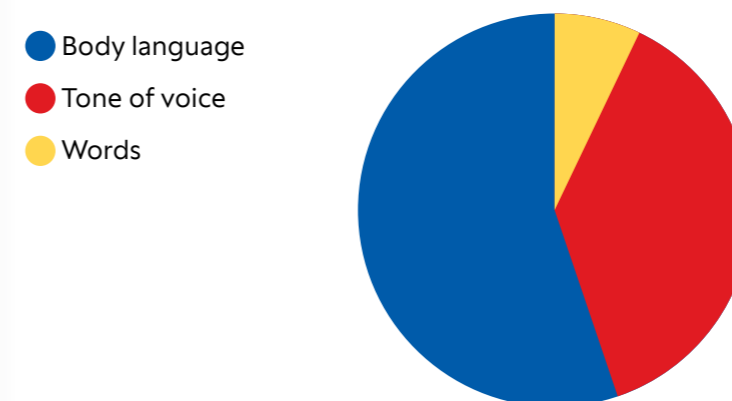
The fact that things get even more complicated in communication is thanks to non-verbal communication, which often communicates something different from what you are saying in words.

In communication it holds that words have just 7% of the weight, tone of voice has 38% and body language has a full 55%.

So it is not even that important what we say, but rather how we say it.

In communicating with a student it is important to be mindful of non-verbal signs (such as various body postures, tone of voice, body language), and if the non-verbal message does not seem to you to align with the verbal message, you can draw the student’s attention to this. You can say for instance: “I wasn’t convinced by your...”

Graph 1: The significance of non-verbal speech



3.3. Clear communication

Clear communication in a relationship with a student has other purposes in addition to providing information. Through high-quality communication students feel included, they are more motivated to achieve their goals, and at the same time it contributes positively to the development of good interpersonal relations.

The relationship is like a bridge, where the tutor is 100-percent responsible for their half and the student 100-percent responsible for their own half.

So – are you ready to learn?

In front of you are a number of tips on how to prepare to provide information to another person in a way that will be as clear and understandable as possible. Memorise some of these pieces of advice and practice them daily. And don't forget – practice makes perfect!

- Get to the core of what you want to communicate to the student.
- Communicate the core concisely and clearly (simply, in understandable language).
- Do not try to pass on to your interlocutor all the knowledge you have about a thing.
- Avoid jargon, foreign words, abbreviations and so forth.
- Provide the information in a logical sequence (1, 2, 3...).
- Make the information more appealing with visual aids, examples, descriptions and so forth.
- Provide the information several times, repeat the essence, make a summary.
- Listen to your interlocutor carefully.
- Check to see that they have understood properly.

3.4. Active listening

Once you have made sure to provide clear and understandable information to the student, your next task is active listening. Active listening is the reflection of the content and feelings, along with a summarising, of everything the other person has said. The listener is actively involved in clarifying the thoughts and feelings of the speaker.

We speak of active listening when:

- you want to hear what the other person wants to say;
- you are ready to take the time for a conversation and to listen to the other person;
- you are ready to understand that person.

Always listen

Active listening is vital in the relationship with a student. This means that the student has the feeling that you are listening to them, taking them into consideration and understanding them, and respecting their needs. Empathy plays an important part in this. The student must have the feeling that their problems are understood and that everything has been done to resolve them.

Politeness

Words such as please and thank you are often forgotten in relationships. But it is especially important in work with students not to neglect the basics of etiquette. The student will have the feeling of being valued and respected, and not just being one of the crowd.

Involve the student in the process of solving a problem

If the student has a problem, involve them in the process of solving it. They should always have a handle on what the next steps will be and how soon they can expect a solution. It is advisable to draw up a plan together for solving problems

and small goals that you will stick to. Table 5 shows several skills that can help you be an adept listener.

Table 5: Skills that will help you listen

Technique for listening skills	Description
asking open questions	<p>These are questions that the student can answer descriptively, and they are useful for a more in-depth understanding of the student's topic, since they outline for you the student's situation and views on it.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>What (describes facts)?</p> <p>How (process, feelings)?</p> <p>Why (causes)?</p> <p>Could... (general description of situation)?</p>
asking closed questions	<p>These are questions for which you will get the answer 'yes' or 'no'. You can make use of closed questions when you want to conclude the conversation, for instance 'So, are we agreed then?'</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>Did you...?</p> <p>Was there...?</p>
technique of paraphrasing statements	<p>This is a technique where you repeat what you have heard, so you can make sure you understood the student properly. Repeat back to the student some of the main words – this encourages them to describe the details.</p>

technique of reflecting feelings

Focus attention on the feelings that accompany the problem.

Example:

Ask the student: 'How do you feel about this?'

technique for summarising what you heard

At the end of the conversation summarise all the facts, feelings and reasons the person presented to you. Say in your own words what the other person told you. Also, summarise the agreement between the two of you. You can also ask the student to sum up the key communications of your meeting. In this way you can make sure you both understood what was agreed in the same way.

3.5. Conditions for a successful relationship and communication between tutor and student

Respect:

- take some time to provide for a suitable space;
- introduce yourself to the student and remember their name;
- listen attentively, do not interrupt and do not try to persuade;
- ask open questions, without criticism or judgement.

Being genuine:

- know how to talk about yourself and show your feelings;
- do not try to appear different from what you really are;
- do not make promises that you cannot keep, i.e. stick to your promises and agreements.

Empathy:

- include non-verbal elements in your responses;
- take a personal approach;
- listen actively.

Quick tip

In communication it will be easier to overcome obstacles if you use an 'I' message. This means that instead of a 'you' message (e.g. 'How could you do that!') use the first person singular and words such as 'it bothers me...', 'it doesn't feel right to me', 'it seems to me' and so forth. In this way it is easier to be closer to the other person, since they will not feel threatened.

3.6.

When not everything goes to plan in communication

It is always a good idea to first try to work out the real reason for some unpleasant behaviour from the other person. The reasons are often really simple. Perhaps the student feels under-appreciated, or that they deserve more attention, that they have not progressed in their studies as they would have liked and so forth. The reasons can also relate to serious personal difficulties (financial, learning, love and so forth).

Often a very simple approach in solving problems is a simple conversation where you show interest in the other person. Try to establish a calm and pleasant atmosphere (for instance have a coffee or tea together, go out for lunch and so forth) and talk about possible problems or unresolved issues. Show understanding if the reason for the difficulty is justified, and offer help. If the difficulty continues and the behaviour of the other person becomes increasingly disruptive for others, it is time to take other action.

3.6.1.

Setting boundaries

Dealing with difficult behaviour involves an approach similar to dealing with bringing up a difficult child. It is important to set boundaries and to stick to them consistently yourself. It should be clearly determined what is acceptable and what is not. It is extremely important that you respond quickly when boundaries have been overstepped. Often you will have to respond immediately, but it is advisable to consider things at least for a moment first. But do not spend too much time thinking, or worse, do not avoid a confrontation, since this will send the other person the message that everything is just fine and they can continue behaving the way they do.

Boundaries are a message about what rules need to be observed, where the boundaries of your own integrity lie and what your expectations are. Boundaries determine criteria, and they are a kind of 'recipe' for how you wish and permit others to behave towards you. Through them you define what is acceptable, safe and permissible for you in your relationship with another person.

How to set boundaries for another person:

- clearly express your expectations;
- agree on rules of cooperation;
- do not apologise or give reasons – just provide a brief explanation and stick with that;
- be consistent;
- through verbal and non-verbal communication show that you are being serious;
- be respectful but determined;
- present your demands in good faith and in a friendly way;
- do not impugn the integrity or dignity of the other person.

3.6.2. How to communicate with a difficult partner

Acting professionally

Be sure on your part that you have acted professionally, with propriety and in the best possible way in the given moment. Prepare well for the meeting. If the other person 'drives you up the wall', take a time out and then continue the communication when you are calm. Be self-reflective – think about how you too could respond differently. None of us are infallible – if you make a mistake apologise and try to put it right.

Stay calm

When the other person behaves improperly towards you (is unfriendly, insulting, aggressive, ignorant and so forth), it is very hard to stay calm. It is important in these moments for you to be able to recognise your feelings and find a way to calm down. This can involve conscious breathing, counting in your head, a brief time out (e.g. going out for a glass of water). If you are very upset, postpone the conversation to another time.

Exercise for rapid calming

Close your eyes, breathe in deeply and exhale, and in your thoughts go to your 'safe place'. This is a place that can exist in reality or just in your head – it doesn't matter. What is important is that you feel pleasant and safe there. Focus on how you feel in your 'safe place'. When you open your eyes again, keep the positive feelings with you. This exercise will help mitigate unpleasant feelings and make it easier to continue your work.

Find a solution

In solving the problem do not dwell on who is at fault, but rather focus on solutions. Avoid trying to rectify the past, and

be in the present moment. For instance: 'The situation is such and such, so let's see what we can do moving forward...' Seek out multiple solutions and focus on the best one.

3.6.3. Different types of difficult partners

a) Negativists and complainers

These are negativistic, cynical and unenthusiastic people, critical of everything and everyone, not willing to cooperate or take responsibility, and always see the fault as lying in others. They are chronically unsatisfied and constantly complain.

Recommended action: Do not play the part of a saviour. Let them have their share of responsibility. Guide them towards solutions. When they give an opinion, do not contradict them. Stick to the facts and repeat the positive things which you think can come out of this.

b) Martyrs and eternal victims

They have an attitude of 'poor me' towards everything, they feel cheated, excluded, and often they arouse feelings of guilt in others.

Recommended action: Do not play the part of a saviour. Help them feel empowered and to strengthen their positive attributes. Set boundaries for them and push them to play the part of an 'adult'.

c) Aggressive and violent people

These are interlocutors who are coercive, aggressive, argumentative and driven to take advantage of other people or to behave aggressively towards them. They frequently try to tell other people 'what's what', they interfere in other people's business, make demands on them and want things to be 'their way'.

Recommended action: Be aware that you cannot change their personality, but you can adjust the way you respond. The majority of aggressive people anticipate other people deferring to them because they do not want conflict. The next time you are in conversation with such a person, listen to them, do not respond and calmly, clearly and consistently stick to the set boundaries.

d) Know-alls

They have a superiority complex and at every step they have a sense of greater worth, they are arrogant, egocentric and think they are always right.

Recommended action: Do not object to their judgements, since you will achieve the most with them if you agree with them or even give them some kind of praise. Politely cut off the conversation and advise them to write everything down rather than telling you. Set a clear boundary where it is needed.

e) Passive people

These people are meek, quiet and subservient, they avoid conflict and along with it all responsibility.

Recommended action: Encourage and embolden them. Together with them set out small steps that they can achieve.

3.6.4. Time for action

Make a plan. Every tutor must also be a good strategist. This also applies to confrontations with difficult students. Think about where, when and how you will speak to them. Make sure that the conversation takes place between the two of you – unless you take the view in advance that another person should be present.

Focus on the actions, not on the person. When you confront an individual regarding their difficult behaviour, focus on their actions. Do not use personal attacks, such as 'You're bad, incapable, irresponsible...' Try to say: 'Your behaviour is having a bad effect on...'

Offer an alternative. For the thing identified as a problem, you should offer a positive alternative. How should the student act in similar situations, how should they respond – in other words what is acceptable and even desirable from them.

Use 'I' messages. In communication and descriptions of the reasons why a certain behaviour is problematic, if you use 'I' sentences this will significantly reduce the defensiveness and resistance from the other person.

Listen. Do not forget to take the time to really listen. Do not deny the other person the right to defend themselves and explain their reasons. This enables you to maintain an appropriate level of objectivity and provides time for reflection.

Summarise and clarify. When you listen to the other person and together you want to find a creative solution for both sides, summarising is a very useful technique. In this way you can make sure that you have understood correctly (so any difficulty later will not wind up as some endless vicious cycle). You can say for instance: 'If I understand correctly, you are proposing...'

Accentuate the positive. Just as in criticism of undesired, problematic behaviour you objectively highlight critical facts, you should also highlight what is positive. Combine being critical with being positive. In this way you can secure the cooperation of the 'opposing' side and balance the tension in the situation.

Summarise. At the end of the meeting summarise what was agreed for the future and what the consequences will be if the boundaries that have been set are overstepped again. Summarise and emphasise the positive alternative as to what is desired and expected in the future.

The connecting element running through all this is always your own personal orientation. This is the key to all solutions. For this reason, when you are dealing with challenging individuals you should still try to maintain a positive orientation towards them. If you do not fully succeed in this, the golden rule should be that at least you avoid accusations and insults. Act objectively, on the basis of facts, try to find a common solution and not your personal victory. Seek out positive things in other people and highlight them.

3.6.5. Winning way of resolving conflict: “I win – you win”

An enduring and high-quality way of communicating can be found in the win-win ('I win – you win') method, which alone takes into account all the participants and their substantive and emotional needs. In terms of time this method is of course not always the most efficient, but in resolving conflicts that kind of efficiency does not matter.

The best thing is to maintain a balance between your feeling for yourself (the importance of your own interests) and your feeling for others (the importance of good relations). It is important, however, that on matters that are vitally important to you, you do not budge.

In a constructive atmosphere, conflicts can even be beneficial, since they foster creativity, exchanges of views, argumentation and seeking the best solutions. Where a conflict is destructive, first of all everyone needs to calm down, mutual understanding encouraged and alternatives and possible solutions explored. Sometimes humour also helps!

In conclusion, a short story on the power of communication

A story goes that once there was a blind man sitting on the pavement, with his hat next to his feet and beside that a wooden sign on which was written in chalk: 'Please help me, I am blind'.

Some creative professional writer walked by, stopped and looked at the paltry bit of change in the hat. Without asking permission, he grabbed the wooden sign and on the other side wrote a new message. He put the sign back down by the poor man's feet and went on his way.

In the afternoon the writer again walked past the man begging for alms. He noticed that now his hat was full of bank notes and coins. The blind man recognised the writer's gait, so he asked if he was the one who had written the new message, and most importantly, what he had written.

The writer replied: 'Nothing that is any less truthful than what you wrote, but in different words.' And grinning he went on his way. The blind man never found out that the new message read as follows:

'Today it is spring and I can't see it.'

When you do not succeed in something, change the strategy/message and perhaps the new method will be more successful.

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