

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## MANAGING COMMUNICATION IN SMALL GROUP LEARNING: OPENING THE DOORS TO MORE EFFECTIVE DIALOGUING

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Peer workshops can be fun. Many students come prepared to learn and also to unwind between classes through interaction with new friends in what is often perceived as a more relaxed atmosphere. However, because our time in workshop is limited to just two hours a week, being aware of how peer leaders and students interact with each other is important in setting boundaries that will make for a more productive session. As a peer leader, initiating and modeling respectful and open ways of communicating will encourage the students to do the same.

The goal by the end of the semester is for students to take on the responsibilities of directing their own sessions with minimal involvement from the peer leader. Developing more effective communication skills will serve students well beyond the workshop level, in terms of enhancing work, family and social relationships.

### What is communication?

There are many ways that we communicate with each other, whether verbally, through body language or a combination of the two.

Communication involves both a conveyor and a receiver (Dreyfuss, adapted from Juliano and Sofield, 1985). Of course, being physically present is a given, but how many of us are actually completely *there* when we are having a conversation? We may be thinking of what we have to do later in the day, what to have for dinner or what friends we need to catch-up with. We may even be thinking of what to say next, which defeats the purpose of having a conversation because then, we are essentially talking to ourselves.

Communication requires us to be good listeners as well as good speakers. As a participant in a dialogue, we bring with us personal attitudes and what we hear the other person say is very much shaped by our previously acquired knowledge, beliefs and even immediate mood. Thus, we need to approach any exchange with an open mind and the desire to learn something new.

Communication requires the right attitude. Good communication involves an attitude that is “trusting, open, empathetic and honest” (Dreyfuss, adapted from Juliano and Sofield, 1985).

Communication needs to be purposeful. In addition to these three defining characteristics, communication also needs to take place in an environment where the participants can focus on what is being said, without too much distraction, which can come in the form of background noise or even in the form of a peer who is

not being considerate. Ideally, we would also be able to maintain eye-contact with each other, which is aided by the use of round tables, as opposed to rectangular ones which create distance, odd angles and “sides.”

**Communication, therefore, requires the proper physical environment.**

Four types of talk

A useful way of thinking about and understanding group communication is to classify people’s talk into one of four categories. There are any numbers of ways that we can organize “type of talk.” The following chart (cite) is adapted from a guide written for university students working on group projects.

As a peer leader, training oneself to detect these types of talk, noting the frequencies with which they occur and the results that they produce, is important to understanding the communicational dynamics within the workshop.

As a student, being aware of what kinds of talk one uses most often and trying to incorporate the other types will help to insure that one doesn’t become pigeonholed. Students should be led away from sticking with one particular type, and certainly encouraged to avoid egocentric talk. For example, a student who mostly “climate talks” by recognizing the contribution of others should not do this at the expense of repressing their own ideas, or simply sit back and not “think” at all. Although labeling “types of talk” may seem artificial at first, recognizing and practicing this awareness will ultimately help the group function more efficiently and help the students be more independent. To provide juxtaposition with the four “types of talk” noted by Pittman (n.d.) (see Chart I – Types of Talk) adapted from a model used in educational psychology research. The goal was to develop a computer-supported learning system that would recognize and target group interaction problem areas.

**Chart I – Types of Talk**

<b>Types of Talk</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Task Talk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeks information from others</li> <li>• Initiates ideas</li> <li>• Gives information</li> <li>• Elaborates ideas</li> <li>• Evaluates ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “What other ideas can we come up with?”</li> <li>• “There are a number of benefits to this approach. First...”</li> <li>• “Now keep in mind that one of the key concepts in this chapter is...”</li> </ul>
<b>Procedural Talk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that everyone participates by asking more quiet students if they have anything to add or suggest</li> <li>• Establishes agenda</li> <li>• Provides orientation</li> <li>• Curbs digressions</li> <li>• Guides participation</li> <li>• Coordinates ideas</li> <li>• Summarizes others’ contributions</li> <li>• Records group process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Let’s make sure everyone has had a chance to give their input/go up to the board. What do you think?”</li> <li>• “Does this relate to what we are doing right now, or shall we remember it for another time?”</li> <li>• “Is there another way to solve this problem?”</li> </ul>
<b>Climate Talk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize the contributions of group members</li> <li>• Motivate the group</li> <li>• Recognize and reconcile conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Great work!” “You’re on the right track.”</li> <li>• “That’s a good point.” “Now how about a different approach...”</li> <li>• “We’re really on target today.”</li> </ul>

Types of Talk	Function	Examples
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “So we have two very different answers to this problem. Where the steps leading to these two answers differ?”</li> </ul>
<b>Egocentric Talk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggression toward others</li> <li>• Blocks ideas</li> <li>• Seeks personal recognition</li> <li>• Dominates interaction</li> <li>• Pleased for special interests</li> <li>• Disrupts talk</li> <li>• Devalues others</li> <li>• Trivializes group work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “That’s not a very efficient way to solve that problem. I solved it in three steps.”</li> <li>• “But let’s get back to what I was asking about before.”</li> <li>• “Why are we even bothering with this question? It’s probably not going to be on the exam.”</li> </ul>

The characteristics of effective collaborative learning include participation, social grounding, performance analysis, group processing, and active learning conversation skills (Soller, et. al., 1996; McManus and Aiken, 1995). Of these, active learning conversation skills can be further divided into “Active learning,” “Conversation” and “Creative Conflict.” In Chart II, below (adapted from Soller, et. al., 1996 and McManus and Aiken, 1995), these three categories are further subdivided into skills, and examples of possible sentence openers are given.

**Chart II – Active Learning Conversation Skills**

Skill	Type of talk	Function	Outcome	Example
<b>Active Learning</b>	Request	Ask for help/advice in solving the problems, or in understanding a peer’s comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information</li> <li>• Elaboration</li> <li>• Clarification</li> <li>• Justification</li> <li>• Opinion</li> <li>• Illustration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Do you know...?”</li> <li>• “Can you tell me more?”</li> <li>• “Why do you think that?”</li> </ul>
	Inform	Direct or advance the conversation by providing information or advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rephrase</li> <li>• Lead</li> <li>• Suggest</li> <li>• Elaborate</li> <li>• Explain</li> <li>• Justify</li> <li>• Assert</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In other words...”</li> <li>• “To elaborate...”</li> <li>• “Let me explain it this way...”</li> </ul>
	Motivate	Provide positive feedback and reinforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage</li> <li>• Reinforce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Good point.”</li> <li>• “Very good.”</li> </ul>
<b>Conversation</b>	Task	Shift the current focus of the group to a new task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate group process</li> <li>• Request focus change</li> <li>• Summarize information</li> <li>• End participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “OK. Let’s move on.”</li> <li>• “Let me show you...”</li> <li>• “To summarize what we did today...”</li> </ul>
	Maintenance	Support group cohesion and peer involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Request attention</li> <li>• Suggest action</li> <li>• Request confirmation</li> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Apologize</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Excuse me...”</li> <li>• “Would you please...”</li> <li>• “I see what you’re saying.”</li> </ul>

Skill	Type of talk	Function	Outcome	Example
	Acknowledge	Inform peers that you appreciate their comments. Answer yes/no questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appreciation</li> <li>• Acceptance/confirmation</li> <li>• Rejection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Thank you.”</li> <li>• “Okay.”</li> </ul>
<b>Creative Conflict</b>	Argue	Reason (positively or negatively) about comments or suggestions made by peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conciliate</li> <li>• Agree</li> <li>• Disagree</li> <li>• Offer alternative</li> <li>• Infer</li> <li>• Suppose</li> <li>• Propose exception</li> <li>• Doubt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Both are right in that...”</li> <li>• “I agree/disagree...”</li> <li>• “Alternatively...”</li> <li>• “I’m not sure.”</li> </ul>
	Mediate	Suggest to another student that they seek help from the Peer Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer Leader Mediation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Let’s ask the peer leader.”</li> </ul>

### Conclusion

One of the conclusions reached in the study is there is a positive correlation between the balanced usage of various conversational skills and how much the students felt they learned. Also, students who felt they learned the most during the study were members of groups with lower acknowledgment activity. This could be explained by the fact that when we simply acknowledge someone else’s contribution, there is sometime little follow-up. We might praise someone for their idea, without adding to it or challenging it, thus suppressing independent thought.

As individuals living in a social environment, we communicate with each other every day through a variety of ways, whether with words, body language or a combination of the two. Workshop is both an extension of the larger environment and an atmosphere where students should feel at ease to communicate with each other openly and respectfully. The skills that they learn in workshop should not be limited to the knowledge-based variety, but should be of the kind that can help them well beyond the college years. Learning how to better communicate, through observing the types of conversational skills used, and perhaps adjusting the frequency of “types of talk used,” although seemingly artificial at first, will help to establish an atmosphere that is cooperative and a mutually beneficial learning environment. Through the use of sentence openers, students can direct the conversation and give purpose to what they share with the class, while reminding themselves of why they are saying what they are saying in the first place. If students try to maintain a balance in the types of conversational skills they are using, they will also avoid creating a rigid label for themselves, such as “class clown” or “the yes-guy.” Ultimately, the goal by the end of the semester is that the students will choose the direction of each session and adjust it according to their needs, thus shaping their own educational futures. A knowledge of how “talk” or conversation affects the environment of the classroom, and a desire to implement efficient dialoguing will open the doors to a more productive use of workshop time.

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