

The Science Behind Learning: Practical Applications of Curiosity, Sociality, and Emotion in Communication Center Consultations

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Our constantly changing world requires professionals who are adaptable and resilient critical thinkers with strong communication skills. As businesses and organizations demand that new hires demonstrate these abilities earlier in their careers, educators must find resources to help students develop these critical skills. Communication centers play a critical role in student engagement (Strawser, Apostel, Carpenter, Cuny, Dvorak, & Head, 2020) and are often strategically positioned to provide support to educators and students from a wide variety of disciplines. Although communication centers have been historically housed in communication departments, centers have successfully crossed boundaries and reached out to or partnered with other disciplines such as science/nanoscience (Cuny, Ellis-Harrison, & Williams, 2019; Schwartzman, Kirchoff, & Cuny, 2019), advertising (Brown, Rapp, Wallace, Torreano, Rabine, & Johnson, 2019), and business/accounting (Ellis, West, Grimaldi, & Root, 2013). As communication centers cross disciplinary boundaries, exploring and applying research from other fields provides important insight and guidance for communication center directors and consultants as they develop strategies to successfully connect with and support students from fields that are different from their own.

Creating an interdisciplinary framework is particularly important in communication centers that use a peer tutoring model. Research supports that peer tutoring or consulting “can supplement an instructor’s capacity to assist student learning at various stages along the way” (Atkins-Sayre & Yook, 2015, p. xi). To maximize consultation time and effectiveness, consultants must focus on a variety of strategies for helping to enhance the learning process and assisting students in developing effective communication skills. Communication center consultants typically go through training programs that include academic readings, discussion of consulting techniques and feedback delivery, shadowing, and direct observation of consultations with follow-up discussions (similar to the technique described by Book & McCoy, 2015). As communication centers expand their reach and engage with students from other disciplines, consultants should be comfortable helping students take technical content and present it in a way that technical, as well as non-technical, audiences will understand—learning how to simplify language or tell the story behind the numbers, data, or process (see Ellefson, Stengrim, Fourney, & Wingo, 2019 for an example). Furthermore, as centers cross disciplinary boundaries, consultants must “step out of the jargon box of communication studies...to make their feedback

accessible to other audiences” (Schwarzman, Kirchoff, & Cuny, 2019, p. 96). Thus, providing communication consultants with guiding principles that set the stage for learning is critical to improve outcomes and move consultants away from the “jargon box”—insider language or terminology not understood by everyone—particularly when working with students from other majors or disciplines.

Through his research on the science of learning, Eyler (2018) has identified and developed three principles that can be used to create a helpful framework for consultants and should be incorporated into the consultant training program. This framework would give consultants a more extensive understanding of ways to support and enhance student learning, regardless of disciplinary background. Generally, consultants want students to learn, grow, and improve communication skills, so understanding principles that foster student learning increases the likelihood of achieving this goal. Center consultants should focus on improving the quality of consultation time when working with students from any discipline by acknowledging fundamental ways humans learn and intentionally finding ways to encourage three things: curiosity, sociality, and emotion.

Three Learning Principles and Practices for Communication Centers

How humans learn is a topic explored by many disciplines. Eyler (2018) synthesized research from diverse fields such as developmental psychology, anthropology, and cognitive neuroscience to identify five principles or themes important for understanding the science behind learning. Three of

these principles have important relevance for center work: curiosity, sociality, and emotion. Using practical strategies based on these three principles, consultants in communication centers can tailor consultations to enhance learning and better assist students.

Foster Curiosity

Curiosity can be defined “as a critical motive that influences human behavior in both positive and negative ways at all stages of the life cycle. It has been identified as a driving force in child development...and as one of the most important spurs to educational attainment” (Loewenstein, 1994, p. 75). Essentially, curiosity “fuels our individual desire to discover, to inquire, and to figure out how things work” (p. 66). Studies suggest that students are more successful when they utilize curiosity (von Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011). Thus, “fostering curiosity in cases where it is apparent while finding ways to draw it out in those where it might seem less active will make learning more effective for our students” (Eyler, 2018, p. 62-63). To engage the learning process, communication consultants should seek to ask questions and encourage students to look at problems with an inquisitive mind. By asking students to dig deeper and ask “why,” consultants can stimulate student curiosity and engage learning. As students tap into curiosity, they not only gain a better understanding of the topic but explore different perspectives that allow them to be more flexible thinkers and communicators.

Unfortunately, writing consultations can have the opposite effect, stifling curiosity rather than encouraging it. Newkirk (1989) pointed out that generally in writing

conferences the instructor tends “to talk too much” and “the little lecturettes that pop up in writing conferences usually bring things to a grinding halt” (p. 327). The same problem occurs when center consultants try to have all the answers and dominate the discussion. Rather than fostering a student’s curiosity by asking questions, the consultant may fall prey to the trap of being a “know-it-all” and ultimately hinder the learning process for students. Brown, Rapp, Wallace, Torrealano, Rabine, and Johnson (2019) highlighted that many communication centers utilize the Socratic method and train consultants to focus on asking questions with the goal of empowering students to improve their speaking skills. Yet, communication consultant training programs also focus extensively on providing effective feedback during consultations (Ellis & Grimaldi, 2015). This emphasis on feedback may unintentionally move the consultant away from asking questions and push them toward providing mini lectures and “answers.” By drawing on the science of learning and highlighting the importance of fostering curiosity as a starting point for consultation training, consultants can strike a better balance between the art of asking questions (e.g., Socratic method) and providing effective feedback.

Asking students to make predictions at the beginning and end of a consultation may help to heighten curiosity. Lang (2016) argued that “making a prediction nudges me to pay closer attention to what happens...predictions make us curious—I wonder whether I will be right?” (p. 61). For example, a consultant could ask a student to predict the best and worst parts of a paper draft or speech outline. Another

approach would be to ask what is the most significant problem with this paper or speech outline? These prediction questions may peak a student’s curiosity to see if the consultant agrees with their assessment. Lang also highlighted that “heightening our curiosity not only makes us interested in the answer to the question but also just generally stimulates our brain to pay closer attention and remember what it encounters” (p. 61). Thus, consultants should consider starting each consultation with a question, asking students to make a prediction about their current work or material, as a way to raise curiosity and prepare them for learning.

The use of curiosity is particularly important for students who need to understand and use quantitative data to support arguments. It is critical for consultants to push students to think and process beyond the numbers and discover the “story” behind the numbers. This ability to uncover and communicate the story is a skill students will need as future professionals. When working with clients, understanding and communicating the story behind the numbers allows professionals to connect with their audience and ultimately be more persuasive. As Silver (2012) observed, “numbers have no way of speaking for themselves. We speak for them. We imbue them with meaning. Like Caesar, we may construe them in self-serving ways that are detached from their objective reality” (p. 9). Thus, consultants can model curiosity for students by asking questions about the data presented. By asking questions, consultants can spark a students’ curiosity and help them to better learn, understand, and ultimately communicate the material.

For example, when working with students preparing a persuasive business presentation, asking them to identify the top three reasons for buying, selling, and holding a stock may help them to consider multiple perspectives, rather than simply looking at an upbeat sales forecast based on management's predictions and rushing to make a "buy" recommendation. In addition, although the numbers may suggest the potential for future growth, probing for the story behind the numbers is every bit as important as considering a set of data points. Understanding a management team's strategic plan and the viability of that plan is an important story to explore when considering a company's sales forecast and future profits. Consultants can ask students questions that require them to probe deeper, to go beyond the numbers and discover the story before considering recommendations. For example, "Is the data provided by the company complete? Does the data provided fully support management's strategic plan? What other numbers could be relevant and helpful to consider?" Instead of just presenting the numbers behind a sales forecast, identifying and explaining the connections between the strategic plan and predicted earnings provides the student, and thus the audience, with a better understanding of the information, which typically makes it more compelling.

Encourage Sociality

Sociality creates an important setting for learning. As humans, we are social creatures and "our bonds with other people are an integral part of being human, and...the starting point for the way we experience the world...including learning" (Eyler, 2018, p. 67-68). "To cultivate an environment

in which social pedagogies can thrive, it is important to first establish a social classroom. Social classrooms have at least three vital components: a sense of belonging, a focus on community building, and a teacher who models effective intellectual engagement" (p. 112). These same components can be applied to encourage sociality in communication centers. Consultants can create a sense of belonging by welcoming students into the space and inviting them to return. Consultants should be aware of their nonverbal communication and effectively use eye contact, warm facial expressions, and welcoming gestures to create a comfortable environment where students feel welcomed and included. A sense of belonging can also be cultivated through the use of photos and other materials that feature the students. For example, communication centers should consider posting photos of current and former students participating in various activities, such as class outings, student organization events, or communication center events. Student photos remind students that the space is theirs and they belong. Belonging sets the stage for learning and growing, an important part of communication centers' work.

In addition to bolstering a sense of belonging, the dedication of physical space (i.e., a communication center) also contributes to community building, another vital component of the social classroom. Carpenter and Apostel (2012) discussed the importance of creating a collaborative environment in the communication center by highlighting that "just as a speech should create an intellectual space of collaboration, the communication center should fulfill the need for a safe collaborative environment" (p. 166). Ideally, communication centers should

feel large enough to find a corner or spot for quiet reflection, but also small enough to require at least a little amount of social interaction, even if it is just a quick “hello” to the other people in the room. Countless conversations between students, as well as consultants, have been started through the simple necessity of that small interaction. The more time the students spend in the communication center, the more they get to know each other and the consultants, and the safer they feel. They develop a level of comfort that enables them to feel like they belong to a community.

The specific configuration of the physical space is another important consideration when trying to promote a sense of belonging and community. Communication centers can be configured to accommodate individuals, small groups, or large groups. Ideally, students should be free to rearrange the room as desired which encourages students to sit together, even if they are studying independently. Something as simple as sitting in the center at the same table as another student can create a sense of togetherness that would be absent elsewhere. Furthermore, this space design allows for collaboration, and as Carpenter and Apostel (2012) suggested, provides increased “opportunities for students to share their work in a social setting” (p. 171). Communication centers can be a place where students are welcome to spend a significant amount of time interacting with and getting to know each other, as well as the centers’ consultants.

Communication centers’ consultants also play a role in the cultivation of a sense of community, not only in their openness and welcoming attitudes, but in their ability to connect with students as peers, or even friends,

would. The use of the peer tutor model is important, as it minimizes the tendency of students to feel more reserved or anxious. The consultant can sit and study at a table or desk in the center between appointments and can listen to and participate in the various conversations. When the consultant is a peer, the students can speak freely with each other, which deepens their relationships and further enhances the sense of an authentic, genuine community. They are also less concerned about the consultant judging them or being overly critical when working with them, as compared to potential concern a student may have when interacting with a faculty member or a center’s director. Cuny (2018) pointed out the importance of also ensuring the center is a place where consultants (staff) feel included, safe, and valued in ways that allow them to speak freely. Tonkins (2018) also discussed the importance of creating a safe and brave space for communication center staff to have “open dialogue where the concept is being challenged, and not the person...it is important to steer conversations in such a manner that no one feels attacked” (p. 96). Center directors and leaders should carefully monitor how consultants or tutors are feeling and provide opportunities for them to voice their concerns related to issues inside and outside the center. Centers should seek to foster inclusive environments that extend to students and consultants alike. By setting the stage for safe and authentic conversations, sociality can be enhanced in the center.

Consultants can further promote sociality in the center by modelling empathy and effective intellectual engagement. Eyler (2018) identified the importance of showing “positive regard

and empathy for all students,” as well as listening carefully and finding value in each student’s contributions (p. 88-89). Bryant, Cuny, and Davidson (2016) discussed the important connections between Communication Accommodation Theory and the consultation experience in centers. They argued that understanding and applying immediacy both verbally (e.g., using a person’s name, previewing, and reviewing) and nonverbally (e.g., smiling, nodding, eye contact, vocal expressiveness, and open posture) are central to student perceptions and learning outcomes. Typically, communication center consultants work with both individuals and small groups, and in both settings, there are effective strategies they can employ to cultivate and communicate empathy. When working with individual students, consultants should consciously adopt a positive, encouraging tone and remember to identify and comment on the good aspects of the student’s work, not just the areas that need improvement. Active listening and careful consideration of the student’s questions and specific concerns are also important, even (or especially) when the consultant believes the student is focusing on the wrong issue or misunderstanding the problem. Asking questions, summarizing, and rephrasing what the consultant believes the student is trying to say is another way to promote effective, positive communication and show the student that the consultant cares about the student and what he/she has to say. Cuny, Wilde, and Stephenson (2012) further support these ideas and discussed how important it is for peer tutors to demonstrate empathic listening skills by utilizing focusing skills (i.e., being attentive to the student), encouraging skills (i.e.,

motivating the student to talk more), and reflecting skills (i.e., paraphrasing and summarizing). Empathic listening communicates unconditional regard and support and ultimately fosters sociality in the center.

As is the case with individual student consultations, during group consultations, the consultant should be positive and encouraging, listening to every group member. Bryant et. al (2016) suggested that “peer educators must facilitate conversation between group members, allowing them to interact with one another, working to accomplish the group goals while processing their verbal and nonverbal messages in real time” (p. 45). When working with small groups, a consultant should seek to facilitate discussion, involving every group member and encouraging collaboration. Throughout the consultation, consultants can ask quieter members for their thoughts, in order to draw out new ideas or additional facts. The consultant should not dominate the discussion but should continue to ask open-ended questions that require the group to think critically about the topic. Asking effective questions and facilitating a lively, fruitful discussion is the best way for consultants to model intellectual engagement—it is a powerful illustration of how learning is, fundamentally, a social activity.

These best practices are important for encouraging sociality in the center and ultimately enhancing student learning. Face-to-face encounters are natural settings for encouraging sociality, but consultants must be intentional to establish social presence and enhance the learning environment during consultations (Eyler, 2018, p. 112). Furthermore, communication center directors and staff should consider other ways to

foster sociality outside of the consultation situation by hosting events and opportunities for students to relax and engage. For example, a communication center could offer occasional game days or movie nights to promote social interactions and build relationships with students. These activities could set the stage for future learning during consultations because students may feel more comfortable and willing to engage.

Engage Emotion

Human emotion “adds substance, nuance, and contours to our social interactions” (Eyler, 2018, p. 115). Emotion has the potential to enhance or undermine the learning process. When channeled effectively, emotion can trigger and cement cognitive gains; however, overwhelming emotions, positive or negative, can become a distraction. It is important to strike a balance—effectively managing positive emotions and minimizing negative emotions returns the greatest cognitive gains. As such, regulating emotion is important for consultants to be aware of during a consultation. Ward and Schwartzman (2009) found that “emotional intelligence, empathy, and interpersonal trust serve[d] as necessary underlying components of successful consultations” (p. 363). In addition, Ward and Schwartzman (2009) explained that “if consultants are able to control their own emotions, they will be better able to address the emotions from their clients, thus increasing the productivity within consultations” (p. 367). Eyler (2018) highlighted that maximizing the impact of emotion may appear to be a simpler task in the humanities than in other disciplines; however, he noted, emotion can be just as effective in STEM and other disciplines by exploring the

“stories” behind the various topics. The story is formed by the broader context or environment that surrounds a topic—what it is influenced by or the indirect result of, what it connects or relates to, or what it is the cause of. They are the various factors and concepts that are generally ignored because they are not within the immediate scope of the specific task at hand. For example, when working with students from a business major, rather than simply asking about the technical content or facts reflected in a financial statement, consultants should prime student emotion by asking about how the company was founded or explore some of the company’s history.

Another best practice for regulating emotion is to help students “pre-regulate” emotion by naming and labeling the challenge. For many students, frustration is the most significant negative emotion experienced when working on critical thinking and communication. Furthermore, for students who have been heavily focused on technical competence, it is not always easy to learn how to grapple with issues that have no single “right” answer or topics that have a lot of gray area and countless perspectives to consider. Understanding their frustration and helping them regulate that emotion is essential to cultivating a healthy and effective learning environment in the center. For example, when students begin struggling during a consultation, the consultant can help them acknowledge and label the feeling by jumping in with, “I know this is hard, keep trying!” or “I know this is a challenging question to answer, take your time.” These statements may be helpful to students as they seek to manage their emotions. Another strategy is to model how to regulate the

emotion. For example, the consultant could say to an extremely frustrated or upset student, “This is a difficult problem, but we can figure it out. Let’s take a step back for a minute and regroup.” The consultant calmly validates and shares the student’s feelings, reassuring him/her that they are in it together, and offers a strategy to diffuse the emotion before it derails the process. This act of empathy shows the student that his/her emotions will not control the outcome of the situation. In a sense, the negative emotion is diffused because the weight of it is shared. When the consultant assists students in managing emotions, the learning process can be enhanced, rather than hindered, by distracting emotions.

Consultants should also find ways to prime positive emotions, such as happiness, to enhance learning (Eyler, 2018). One simple strategy a consultant should use is addressing students by their names and paying them a compliment. People typically enjoy hearing their names because it makes them feel cared for and seen. Beginning a social interaction with a compliment creates an immediate, positive rapport between consultant and student and helps to dismantle the social anxiety many students feel when seeking assistance—the fear of being negatively judged or perceived by someone whose help they need. The use of humor can also prime positive emotions and help students enjoy the consultation and learn more effectively. Martin (2007) defined humor broadly as verbal and/or nonverbal messages that make people laugh. Meyers, Atkinson, Ball, Goldman, Tindage, & Carton (2015) argued that relevant humor in the tutoring relationship can positively impact the tutor-tutee relationship and learning. It is, however, important to

know what kind of humor is helpful. As Meyers et al. (2015) cautioned, humor perceived to be inappropriate or disparaging could have significant negative effects and self-disparaging humor should be avoided to protect the tutor’s credibility.

The authors have found that when students come into the center and express fear and nervousness around giving a speech, it helps lighten the mood and put students more at ease to share a funny example of others’ speech blunders. The authors frequently share the public-speaking fiascos of various public figures—many of which have “gone viral.” For a particularly humorous example, search online for Phil Davison’s epic speech for treasurer, as well as his subsequent interviews and reflections on the experience. It is also helpful when the authors use examples from their own experiences. For example, one of the authors, an attorney and self-diagnosed introvert, frequently shares her first experience arguing a motion in court. She recounts feeling sick and running to the restroom, and then being frozen just outside the courtroom, unable to muster the strength to open the door. Standing before the judge in a courtroom full of other, more experienced attorneys (including her opponent), presenting her argument, responding to the other side, and answering the judge’s questions, felt like a surreal, out-of-body experience. In the end, however, she got through it—just like her students will—and was proud of herself. Each subsequent appearance in court was easier and less stressful than the one before, and eventually, arguing motions became a skill she excelled at. It is extremely reassuring to students to hear that someone like the author—who in their minds has always been an expert

public speaker—also struggled, just like they do. It also makes them less anxious of being judged when working with the author on their speeches and presentations because she understands how they feel. Using humor and reassuring the student that practice will help them avoid these mishaps can help students relax and focus. In sum, consultants should be aware of students' emotions and seek ways to minimize negative emotions and prime positive emotions to enhance the learning process.

Conclusion

For years, organizations have been demanding that new employees possess two essential skills: critical thinking and effective communication. As a result, there has been an increased emphasis on speaking and writing from first-year composition to upper-division and graduate-level speaking and writing courses, and the support provided by communication centers has proven to be essential in students' development of these skills. While communication centers tend to be housed in communication departments, they have seen increasing success in their attempts to branch out and support other disciplines. With the growing interdisciplinary nature of communication centers comes the need for center directors and leaders to explore and utilize research from other fields as they revise existing practices and develop new strategies to effectively reach and support students from fields unrelated to their own. In communication centers that use the peer tutoring model, it is particularly important to develop a framework that can be effectively applied in multiple disciplinary contexts. Through his research on the science of learning, Eyler (2018) has identified and

developed three principles—curiosity, sociality, and emotion—that can be used to create such a framework. Using practical strategies based on these three principles, consultants in communication centers can tailor consultations to enhance learning and better assist students.

Fostering curiosity increases students' level of interest and engagement in the learning process. Consultants can foster curiosity by asking questions that encourage students to dig deeper. By asking "why," consultants can stimulate student curiosity, helping them to understand and explore a topic and identify different perspectives, which enables them to be more flexible in their thought and communication. Consultants can encourage sociality through fostering a sense of belonging and community and through the modeling of empathy and intellectual engagement. Utilizing a physical space that promotes social interaction and can be reconfigured by students to suit their needs makes students feel that the space is theirs, that they belong there. Consultants can further foster sociality during consultations through the use of empathy and intellectual engagement. Consciously adopting a positive, encouraging tone and remembering to comment on what the student does well, not just the areas that need improvement, makes the student feel safe and confident during this social exchange. Finally, effectively engaging emotion during the consultation has the potential to maximize a student's cognitive gains. Consultants can help students manage their emotions by minimizing the negative emotions and effectively engaging the positive, constructive emotions. Positive emotion can be engaged and channeled through asking

students to tell the “story” behind a topic or to think about the “why”—the larger context or environment around the ideas. Consultants can use empathy to show students that they understand the students’ negative emotions and can help them regulate that emotion by modeling behavior that diffuses it. Emotion can also be engaged through the use of humor, as when the consultant shares her own example of an experience similar to the student’s, which puts the student at ease and reduces the fear of being judged harshly by the consultant—who knows exactly how they feel.

In sum, communication centers should lean into the research of other disciplines as they continue to revise and develop new practices and strategies that respond to the growing and changing needs of their students. Future research should delve deeper into the science of learning and continue to identify and develop additional best practices within the communication center context. Applying the principles and themes identified by Eyler (2018), communication centers and consultants can use the science of learning to foster curiosity, encourage sociality, and engage emotion, creating the ideal environment for student growth and learning.

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