

Ways to integrate communication skills into Higher Education teaching

Communication skills are central to success in school, work and life. Strong communication skills upon entering higher education are linked to higher grades and graduation rates.¹ Additionally, in a recent survey, employers ranked communication as the second most important skill for employees to have, and one that is lacking in entry level applicants.²

Communication takes many forms, from writing a paper or reading a book, to delivering a presentation or engaging in conversation or debate. Whenever possible, communication skills should be taught and assessed through authentic and real-world tasks, to better prepare learners for the communication skills they will need in the workplace. There are various skills that contribute to effective communication, including understanding the context and purpose of a piece of communication, crafting clear and cohesive messages, and active listening.

Below are some sample learning tasks to give you inspiration for how students can develop and practice communication skills in their courses.

Learning activity	Skills involved	Options for modification
Learners read an academic research article and then rewrite it for publication in a popular science magazine.	This activity elicits learners' ability to consider context and purpose. The learner must translate academic topics and terms into something that can be understood by the general public. This activity also requires reading an article with one set of genre conventions and altering those conventions so that they are appropriate for a different genre.	This activity could be used in nearly any subject area, as long as the instructor can find appropriate academic research articles.
A small group of learners participate in a role-played conversation around a given topic. Learners who are not participating in the conversation watch and listen and take notes which will be used to provide feedback to the learners who are in the "fishbowl." Throughout the activity, learners rotate in and out of the fishbowl, taking turns as participant and observer.	This activity elicits active listening skills, as learners need to pay close attention to their conversation partner(s). Additionally, learners should use appropriate nonverbal aspects of communication, such as gestures and body language.	The target conversation can be altered to make this activity appropriate for many subject areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For business and management disciplines, the conversation could involve a business discussion with different stakeholders. • For nursing and psychology, learners could role-play conversations with a patient. • For political science, the discussion could be a debate on a current political topic.
Learners promote a position in an oral presentation, with the goal of persuading the audience to agree with their position.	This activity elicits learners' ability to organize their message so that their ideas flow clearly and cohesively. Learners must also keep the purpose of persuading the audience in mind as they decide what content to include and how to structure their presentation. Additionally, because this is an oral presentation, learners must use nonverbal aspects of communication effectively, such as gestures and body language.	This activity could be used in a wide range of subject areas by varying the topic of the presentation. For the sciences, the presentation could focus on arguing conclusions drawn from independent research. In other fields, the presentation could feature a current topic of debate (such as the climate emergency).

¹ Pearson & P21, *Skills for Today Communication Executive Summary for Educators*

² Pearson Global Employer Research, 2019

These are the big ideas behind the learning activities overleaf. Use these to adapt the examples for your students, or as guidance to devise your own learning tasks.

Both sending and receiving information are crucial

<p>Communication is a social process of both productive skills (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (listening and reading) in which information is exchanged in order to convey meaning and achieve desired outcomes. Both sending and receiving information effectively are crucial to effective communication.</p>	1	Production skills: A sender must be able to reliably craft and deliver messages that clearly convey the intended meaning and achieve the desired outcome.
	2	Receptive skills: A receiver must actively listen and pay attention to messages in order to interpret the meaning intended by the sender.
	3	Communicators must be able to apply these skills in a variety of domains, across a multitude of channels, and among a diverse group of communicators, all the while maintaining a focus on the ultimate goals of the communication.

Use practice and feedback to teach oral communication skills

<p>Having students practice public speaking, review and self-assess their performance, and receive feedback from peers and instructors can support the development of oral communication skills.</p>	1	Prior to practice, establish clear learning objectives and provide expert and peer models of successful performance so students will understand the target competencies.
	2	Use video-recording tools to facilitate self-reflection on performance.
	3	Have peers and instructors provide formative feedback, typically using a rubric. Use constructive criticism and highlight strengths in order to boost confidence.

Teach strategies for planning and revising pieces of written communication

<p>Designing effective communication requires students to plan and reflect before engaging in communication itself. Many students, particularly those with less well-developed communication skills, will benefit from direct instruction in the planning and reflection phase.</p>	1	Focus writing instruction on the writing process, which includes thoughtfully planning the piece of writing and engaging in revision and editing to refine the piece, in addition to the final written piece.
	2	Organize planning activities using evidence-based instructional frameworks, such as PLAN-WRITE. This framework includes strategies like: Be mindful of the writing prompt, brainstorm and select specific main ideas to focus on, include details that support the main ideas, vary sentence structure and word choice to make the writing more interesting to read. ³
	3	Have students give and receive formative feedback on writing assignments and revise accordingly.

Focus communication assessments on tasks that students will experience in the real world

<p>When designing any assessment, it is important to ensure alignment between the skills to assess, the evidence of those skills, and the tasks meant to elicit that evidence. Tasks should be similar to real-world communication scenarios, and evidence can be gathered through direct observation of the task or examination of an artifact of the task.</p>	1	In addition to formal essays, consider other communication tasks students will experience in the workplace, such as writing emails, defending a thesis, or presenting at business meetings.
	2	Rubrics are essential tools for assessing communication.
	3	Role plays can be used to practice and assess interpersonal communication.

³ De La Paz, S., & Graham, S. (2002). *Explicitly teaching strategies, skills, and knowledge: Writing instruction in middle school classrooms*. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(4), 687-698.