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Using Social Lubricants to Increase Conversationality

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Abstract

Responding to the epidemic of the dying art of conversation (Asha, 2014; Barnwell, 2014 April), this activity constructs a space in which students tap into social lubricants as a conversational, artistic tool to increase conversational skills. Inspired by Monahan & Lannutti's (2000) social lubricant work, this study views social lubricants— any object or action that facilitates social interaction, such as a dog or a compliment— as a vital resource that merits pedagogical attention. After completing a role-play in which students tap into a social lubricant to achieve an assigned goal, students will be able to: (a) define social lubricants; (b) describe the utility of social lubricants in social interaction; and (c) critically appraise ways in which using social lubricants can lessen communication apprehension.

Courses

Interpersonal Communication, Basic Survey Course, Group Communication, Organizational Communication, and Intercultural Communication

Objectives

- After completing this single-class activity, students will be able to: (a) define social lubricants; (b) describe the utility of social lubricants in social interaction; and (c) critically appraise ways in which using social lubricants can lessen communication apprehension.

Introduction and Rationale

As communication teachers, we highlight the importance of listening, cultural awareness, and even the influence of self-disclosure on relationships in various courses, yet the art of effective conversation is complicated when face-to-face conversation is replaced with tweets, texts, and emoticons. In fact, Asha (2014) argued that the art of conversation is one of the biggest casualties of living in an online, connected world. This casualty is continually reflected within the classroom. As an example, Barnwell (2014, April) reflected upon his experience with students' lack of conversationality in a recent assignment:

Unless the student facilitator asked a question, most kids were unable to converse effectively. Instead of chiming in or following up on comments, they conducted

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rigid interviews. They shuffled papers and looked down at their hands. Some even reached for their phones—an automatic impulse and the last thing they should be doing (para 5).

The influence of technology on communication has captured scholastic attention (Asha, 2014; Engdahl, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). At the same time, the science and art of conversation, or pedagogy of conversationality, remains untouched which leaves communication instructors grappling with how to get today's student to hold an effective conversation without technology. Barnwell (2014, April) explained, "As I watched my class struggle, I came to realize that conversational competence might be the single-most overlooked skill we fail to teach students" (para 6).

In order to address this need, this activity proposes teaching social lubricants as a pedagogical tool for communication instruction. Social lubricants have been defined as "a mechanism to ease feelings of anxiety and nervousness during social interactions" (Monahan & Lannutti, 2000, p. 175). In other words, social lubricants can be anything in one's context that facilitates social interaction between two or more people. For instance, in Monahan & Lannutti's (2000) study, they discovered that alcohol acted as a social lubricant for women with low social self-esteem when speaking with a confederate male. Such women reported feeling more at ease in conversation and were more satisfied with their conversational efforts. In fact, the social lubricant enabled them to initiate more conversations while also lessening communication apprehension. Further, Holmes (1998) identified compliments as useful social lubricants, which speaks to the multiple forms social lubricants can take within a conversation.

To increase awareness of social lubricants' utility, this activity encourages students to (a) identify social lubricants in various real world social settings, thus potentially reducing communication apprehension in such settings, and then (b) use social lubricants to obtain a social goal. This activity posits that a social lubricant can be found within any context. For instance, a child in a shopping mall, a dog in a park, and holiday punch at a party can all be exploited as social lubricants to initiate and maintain conversation. In other words, the following activity affords students an opportunity to use social lubricants as a means to move beyond *small talk*, or "a type of conversation focused on inconsequential topics such as the weather" (Verderber & Verderber, 2013), as they find their own conversational voice and meet relational goals.

Activity Description

Typically, this activity requires 20–30 minutes including debriefing. Prior to the activity, the instructor will need to prepare three index cards with instructions. Type or print the following scenarios on three different index cards (one scenario per card) in bulleted form:

- Scenario 1 (Exaggerate the following!)
 - Social Goal: To obtain a potential partner's name
 - Setting: Shopping mall
 - Social Lubricant: Child (~2 years old)
- Scenario 2 (Exaggerate the following!)
 - Social Goal: To obtain a potential partner's phone number
 - Setting: Park
 - Social Lubricant: Dog
- Scenario 3 (Exaggerate the following!)

- Social Goal: To obtain consent from a potential partner to go on a romantic date
- Setting: College (or work) party
- Social Lubricant: Punch bowl with punch

At the start of class, and after briefly introducing students to the concept of social lubricants, ask for six volunteers. Ask the volunteers to go into the hall, then instruct the rest of the students to clear a “stage” for the activity in the front of the classroom.

Next, meet with volunteers in the hall to inform them that they will be demonstrating how to use social lubricants in different contexts. Have the students group themselves into pairs and explain that each pair will have a different relational goal (some easier than others). Give one index card to each pair. Designate one individual in each group to use the social lubricant and ask the individual on the receiving end to slightly resist the efforts of the individual attempt to use the social lubricant. Remind volunteers to use the social lubricant as a conversational starting point to achieve their assigned relational goal. Alternatively, you could have the individual who is not using the social lubricant to be unaware of what is happening and only inform them that they are in their given setting and must interact with a given subject (e.g., child in shopping mall, dog in park). Regardless of role and approach, ask volunteers to exaggerate each scenario.

Return to the classroom and bring in each volunteer pair one at a time. Tell the class to (a) identify the social lubricant used in each scenario, and (b) take notes on conversational strategies they believe to be effective or ineffective. After each pair performs their scenario and meets their relational goal, it is vital to debrief.

Debriefing

I recommend the following topics for debriefing: (a) the influence of context on social lubricants; (b) the influence of social lubricants in reducing communication apprehension in dyadic or group settings (i.e., shifting the focus from the speaker to the object); (c) how students might use social lubricants to move beyond small talk toward self-disclosure and discovery; (d) the potential need to adapt to differing social lubricants in various contexts; and (e) disadvantages or advantage of social lubricants in various social settings such as school, work, and home.

Alternatively, prior to group discussion, instructors could have students independently journal for 5–10 minutes on their observations of social lubricants used in the scenarios. Journaling can give students the opportunity to individually process their observations and experiences prior to collective debriefing. Potential reflective journal or discussion questions include:

- Which social lubricant was most effective? Why?
- How do these scenarios mirror or differ from “real life?”
- What makes a social lubricant effective?
- Describe a social setting in which you tend to feel anxious. What social lubricants might you use to lessen your anxiety within that context?
- Discuss the need for individuals to use social lubricants. Provide examples of when you think using social lubricants may be most and least appropriate and effective.

Such questions not only construct a reflective space for students to consider the value of tapping into social lubricants within their dyadic or group interactions, but also provide an opportunity

for students to demonstrate their understanding of social lubricants. Additionally, this allows students the opportunity to identify potential social lubricants and critically appraise ways in which using social lubricants in various contexts might lessen their own communication apprehension, thus fulfilling activity goals and objectives. As students reflect, it is important for instructors to consider ways in which students might respond to this activity.

In my experience, students typically achieve the relational goal indicated on their index card in five minutes or less. The latter scenario of using punch to “score a date” is typically the most difficult. In that particular scenario, students sometimes use additional social lubricants, such as complimenting jewelry worn by their conversational partner, to facilitate conversation. Students usually laugh and enjoy their classmates’ performances. This activity encourages hyperboles that help students to identify social lubricants. In fact, students often share other examples from their personal lives of times they used a social lubricant to speak with someone, or someone tried to use a social lubricant to speak with them. Additionally, this often lively discussion can lead into brainstorming of social lubricants they can use in the future to achieve relational goals and reduce any relational anxiety or apprehension they might experience.

Appraisal

This activity offers students the opportunity to define, identify, and critically assess existing and potential social lubricants in their social worlds by investigating in fictitious, yet familiar, scenarios. In addition, they learn the art (and fun) of initiating and maintaining conversation as they tap into social lubricants as a tool. In other words, students’ creativity is challenged as they must artistically construct dialogue with an “unknown” partner. Doing so helps students to visualize the ambiguity of social interaction, meaning that there is not necessarily a “right way” of initiating or maintaining conversation with others. It is important to realize this activity privileges students who are more comfortable in group settings, which may enable them to more easily model how to use a social lubricant. Using volunteers for this activity is crucial, as it not only allows individuals who feel comfortable to comply, but enables those students to help others by modeling interpersonal assessment skills in what to say, how to say it, and what to use to start and maintain such conversations.

This activity is easily adaptable to a variety of courses as well as student demographics such as age and life experience. For instance, rather than focusing on “traditional” students’ experiences, this activity could be used with adult learners or working adults by altering scenarios to include more workplace situations:

- Alternative Scenario 1 (Exaggerate the following!)
 - Social Goal: To obtain a potential employer’s business card
 - Setting: Airport gate
 - Social Lubricant: Laptop bag with a prominent company logo
- Alternative Scenario 2 (Exaggerate the following!)
 - Social Goal: To make a casual fundraising request
 - Setting: Restaurant
 - Social Lubricant: Menu
- Alternative Scenario 3 (Exaggerate the following!)
 - Social Goal: To establish a connection for a future sales approach
 - Setting: Country club
 - Social Lubricant: Business card

The scenarios could also be tweaked to include intercultural or organizational contexts. The use of props such as a stuffed dog or company merchandise may also help to construct various “real world” settings. Additionally, this activity could be adapted so that the class either knows the social lubricant and goal the performers are attempting to demonstrate. The audience could also give performers a relational play-by-play in “what to do next.” Doing so may capitalize on classroom dynamics and students’ collective creativity.

Overall, this activity allows students to easily identify, describe, and assess ways in which they might benefit from using social lubricants to increase their dyadic and group communication skills as they work toward their relational goals in a fun and safe classroom environment.

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