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**"Party in the Communication Classroom":
Exploring Communication Competence to Raise Social Awareness**

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Abstract

This activity demonstrates communication competence and allows students to observe, assess, and ultimately utilize the model of communication competence to engage with other people successfully. To understand how to engage in communication competence, students must recognize that appropriateness and effectiveness are crucial aspects of their communication. Through the communication competence model, students examine how to achieve effectiveness in their communication by setting goals for specific contexts; they also consider to what extent their goals are achievable given the particular situation. Using a 2014 MTV Video Music Award example, students can analyze why Miley Cyrus allowed a homeless man to accept her award and gave him time to discuss his experience as a homeless person in America to raise awareness about this social issue.

Recommended Courses

- Introduction to Communication
- Communication Theory
- Public or Professional Speaking
- Introduction to Media Studies

Objectives of Activity

By completing this activity, students should be able to:

- ☑ Explain how effectiveness and appropriateness impact communication competence
- ☑ Discuss how appropriate communication is determined by context
- ☑ Assess how to achieve one's goals to be effective within communication
- ☑ Apply communication competence skills

Introduction and Rationale

As students begin to study communication, they understand that meaningful communication varies based on the objectives of the communicators, the relationship between the people involved, and the context of the situation. Students may or may not realize that multiple factors contribute to effective and appropriate communication that can impact the world. This activity demonstrates communication competence and allows the students to observe, assess, and ultimately utilize the model of communication competence to engage with other people successfully. “Communication competence is composed of two elements: appropriateness, which is defined as following the relevant rules, norms, and expectations for specific relationships and situations; and effectiveness, which involves achieving one’s goals successfully” (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2019, p. 20). In order to understand how to engage in communication competence, students must recognize that appropriateness and effectiveness are crucial aspects of their communication, including a better understanding of the rules and norms of a given context and setting goals for the interaction. Through the communication competence model, students examine how to achieve effectiveness in their communication by setting goals for specific contexts; they also consider to what extent their goals are achievable given the particular situation. In addition, students analyze their appropriateness through the required, preferred, and/or forbidden rules in that context. After applying the communication competence model to a

specific popular culture reference, students completing this activity can then develop their communication skills further by understanding how knowledge, skills, sensitivity, and ethics factor into communication competence.

Finally, this activity utilizes active learning techniques in the classroom. Active learning activities “involve students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 1). This activity employs active learning through scenarios by having students analyze the example of Miley Cyrus’s acceptance speech while also situating them within her perspective. If they won an award for their work and wanted to raise social awareness about an issue that was important to them, how would they attempt to engage in communication competence? Consequently, the activity allows students to identify course concepts and create their own real-world examples that demonstrate communication competence and could be utilized to raise social awareness.

Description of Activity

This activity focuses on Miley Cyrus’s 2014 MTV Video Music Award (VMA) win for her song Wrecking Ball. Rather than accept the award herself, Miley allowed a homeless man to accept the award on her behalf. She permitted him to go on stage and discuss his experience as a homeless person in America to raise awareness about this social issue. While this example is from several years ago, it is a great opportunity to discuss communication competence. After the awards show, many viewers wondered whether Miley’s actions were appropriate and questioned her motives. Most students are unfamiliar with this example and the conversation generated after the ceremony because it happened in 2014; therefore, they can observe and examine the event to draw their own interpretations. Students can analyze if Miley was appropriate and followed the

rules and norms for the award ceremony and the audience's expectations; they can also consider how award rules and norms have changed since 2014. Additionally, students can attempt to identify Miley's goals and consider to what extent she was effective; because the example is older, the instructor can also further discuss with the class the differences between short-term and long-term effectiveness within communication messages.

Procedures/Steps

Before class, students should read the chapter in their textbook covering communication competence. This information is well explained using pages 17-23 in Rothwell's (2013) *In the company of others: An introduction to communication*, (4th ed.). Instructors should also obtain a video of Miley Cyrus's acceptance speech from the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards and/or the news coverage that followed. When she won the Video of the Year award, Miley allowed a homeless man to accept her award rather than accept the award herself. This gave Miley the opportunity to promote her charity, which seeks to raise awareness about homelessness. Miley allowed a homeless man to speak about his real-life experiences during the ceremony. After the ceremony, Miley continued to promote his speech and message on her social media platforms. This link provides a great description of the popular culture event:

<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/meet-homeless-man-accepted-miley-cyrus-vmaw-award/story?id=25114619>

As a class, introduce communication competence and how appropriateness (explicit and implicit rules) and effectiveness (setting goals) contribute to it. Discuss the three types of goals: content, relationship, and identity. Alberts, Nakayama, and Martin (2019) identify three types of goals: "Content goals describe the concrete outcomes you would like to achieve during an interaction...

Relationship goals refer to your desire to change or maintain your relationship with another...

Finally, identity goals describe how we would like others to see us or help us see ourselves" (p. 20). Then, introduce the ABC news video that describes the awards ceremony and Miley's actions afterward. After students view the video, divide the class into small groups and ask them to consider the following questions:

- 1) What were Miley's communication goals in this example? Consider both the ceremony and her actions afterward in your answer.
- 2) What were Miley's content goals, relationship goals, or identity goals? Explain why you believe they were that type of goal.
- 3) What rules are present within this context? Are the rules explicit or implied?
- 4) Even though Miley did not speak during the ceremony, how did her actions both during the ceremony and after it contribute to her communication goals?

Following their conversations, gather the class back together as a whole to discuss their small group conversations. Create a list of the specific goals that students think Miley had when she made this decision; in other words, why do students perceive that Miley did what she did when allowing someone else to accept her award? Students can discuss and debate whether Miley had content goals in which she wanted to raise awareness about the homelessness crisis or identity goals in which she wanted to change how others perceived her. In addition, make a list of the explicit or implied rules within this context. After facilitating discussion and creating these lists with the class, ask the following follow-up questions:

- 1) Using the list of goals that you created, do you perceive Miley's goals were effective? Why or why not?

- 2) Do you perceive Miley's goals were achievable? How has time affected her ability to demonstrate communication competence?
- 3) Do you perceive Miley's actions/behavior was appropriate in this situation? Why or why not?

Through the answers to these questions, students can better understand how to engage in communication competence. By emphasizing to what extent Miley was appropriate and effective both during the ceremony and afterward on social media, students can recognize the thought process of creating messages with other people. Thus, this activity is a great foundation for students to understand the communication process and to start to become more mindful of the implications of it.

Debriefing

After students have considered to what extent Miley Cyrus demonstrated communication competence, students can also ponder how to expand their own skills in effective communication. Ask students to consider what they would have done if they were Miley and accepting the VMA Video of the Year Award. Students should now imagine that they themselves are a successful band. Divide the class into small groups (i.e. bands) and ask them what they could do to bring awareness to a social issue/cause (it can be any organization/cause they specifically care about). Pose the following questions:

- 1) How would you learn about the rules in this context to ensure appropriate communication?
- 2) What would be your goals during an awards ceremony, and how might your goals influence what you say and do?

3) How can you clearly and concisely express the message about the social issue/cause you are trying to communicate?

These debriefing questions focus on how students can achieve the skills needed for communication competence. Through knowledge (knowing the rules), demonstrating the skills you learn (a clear message, for example), sensitivity (such as observing nonverbal behavior), and ethics (having respect and being honest), students can start embodying the skills needed for communication competence. Moreover, rather than being classmates working in a small group, students can creatively envision how, as a band, they can craft effective communication that can raise social awareness about a cause that is important to them. After giving them time to reflect (or perhaps during the next class), have each "band" share their social issue/cause and strategies for raising awareness with the entire class. This debriefing activity allows students to craft effective messages about their social issue/cause and converse with their classmates to raise awareness about social issues/causes that are important to them.

Conclusion

By using a popular culture example featuring a celebrity that students are familiar with, this activity establishes a connection between a musician that the students recognize and a core communication concept. As a result, the students are not just reading the information in a textbook but are actually able to apply the material to a popular culture reference. This often leads to a better understanding of the subject matter since students have viewed communication competence through a specific example. Students in my classes have enjoyed debating Miley's goals with their classmates and analyzing to what extent she raised social awareness through her actions during and after the ceremony. Moreover, because students can create their own

scenarios as famous musicians, this activity allows them to utilize the communication competence model in their own communication endeavors. As Zayapragassarazan and Kumar (2012) argue “Effective learning involves providing students with a sense of progress and control over their own learning. This requires creating a situation where learners have a chance to try out or test their ideas” (p. 3). Since this activity concludes with students situating themselves as a musician who wants to promote a social justice issue, it allows students to learn about communication competence and apply it. Students can then recognize how they can use effective messages to engage in a social cause they are also passionate about in the real world.

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