

# **From Ordinary to Extraordinary: Student Tales of the Transformative Power of Interpersonal Communication**

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## **Abstract**

This reflective essay explores the transformative power of interpersonal communication, especially when coupled with experiential learning. It follows the unique stories of four college students, as their lives evolve when interpersonal communication empowers them.

## **Keywords**

experiential learning; interpersonal communication; empowerment; belonging

## **Introduction**

Another “pandemic day” waiting for my Zoom class to arrive. One by one the little black boxes of names appear, though not actual faces, because I can’t require video participation. Some days, when the boxes light up for comments, I feel like I’m a game show host, rather than an assistant teaching professor at a major university. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined teaching public speaking/effective communication or any of my other courses in a Zoom setting. But here I am, and it is going just as well as in the classroom, though not an “ideal” scenario for me or my students. The whole experience has caused me to reflect on what it takes to empower students through their communication skills, no matter what the environment for learning. Although I would describe my writing style as more conversational than academic, I decided to put my reflective thoughts together on the significance of promoting interpersonal communication and experiential learning in any teaching scenario, and to do so by telling the tales of four students. I could share stories from many, many students, but these four came to mind because their scenarios are all very different; however, at the core of each story is the power of interpersonal communication and experiential learning.

When I began my journey as a college instructor in graduate school, the requirements were frighteningly straightforward—teach public speaking from “this” book, incorporate two quizzes plus a final, and require “these” five speeches, period. No training, no guidance, just “have a nice day.” I was unprepared and terrified, but I did what I was told to do. Hated it. The confinement, the monotony, the regurgitation of information ... it didn’t ring true for me. It was a bit of a

defining moment about how to teach interpersonal and public communication skills to both empower my students and to empower myself. In other words, I decided to create a learning scenario not just to provide knowledge and skill development, but also to enhance my students' feelings of interpersonal strength and confidence. Part of my decision was based on a study I read on empowerment in organizations (Chiles & Zorn, 1995, p. 21), which recognized "the importance of the communicative process in empowerment" and noted that interpersonal communication, in particular, plays a vital role.

Before I share my student stories, I think it's important to note that not every student walks out of my course with the same recognition and enthusiasm to step out of their comfort zones and more actively communicate. Some just check off the boxes of course requirements. Some are far too tentative to reach out, to express themselves, or to participate in the "experience." I often reflect and ask myself, "Could I have done more?" I share the same lessons and encouragement with all my students, but there are always some that do and do not emerge from their interpersonal cocoons.

So, now, on to these "tales" of transformation.

### **Student Tale #1**

Fast-forward years later to a college classroom, where I'm teaching a communication course. Janelle (pseudonym) comes to class, sits all the way in the back against the right wall. She always wears a hoodie and keeps it tight around her head. She walks a bit hunched over, eye contact with the floor, and rarely participates in class. She is timid in discussions and interactive activities and is barely audible when giving her speeches. When I give the career assignment that I have incorporated into the course, she slides down in her seat. Because of a strong professional background in corporate human resources prior to teaching full time, I want my students to get out from behind their phones and computers to interview a professional in their career field of interest. I believe that today's students need to take interpersonal initiatives to network and look for opportunities, which challenges their "send an email or text or use social media" mentality. In a study that examined Internet usage (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000, p. 188), it was noted that "those who found interpersonal communication to be less rewarding and were anxious when communicating with others face-to-face, used the Internet for interpersonal utility." Additionally, another study looking at face-to-face communication versus technology in relation to teens (Pierce, 2009, p. 1370) concluded that for teens "who may be shy and feel inhibitions about talking with others in person, various technologies provide a safe opportunity for them to interact with others." Finally, Lee and Stapinski (2012, p. 204) concluded that "socially anxious individuals" rely on online communication due to "perceptions of negative evaluation during face-to-face interactions."

These thoughts pop into my head as I notice Janelle sticking around after class. Having digested the assignment, she looks at me and says, "I don't know how to do this." We sit and brainstorm. Janelle wants to be a physical therapist. She mentions she spent time with a therapist in high school, due to a sports-related injury. I suggest contacting that therapist to see if Janelle can have 10 minutes of time for an interview. She agrees to try. The "ask" always seems so hard for students. After spring break, when the assignment and accompanying presentation are due, Janelle comes to class. She's walking a little straighter, isn't wearing a hoodie, greets me with a smile, and says "Hi, Professor." "Wow," I think. She even raises her hand early on to volunteer to do her presentation. She did ultimately interview her physical therapist, who spent considerable time with

her. At the end of the interview, the therapist offered her a summer internship. Another defining moment, both for Janelle and for me. She was so transformed, empowered, and proud. She had experienced a recognition for the power of communication. So did I. I also knew that the philosophy of experiential learning I'd created in my course was working. No, Janelle didn't do a quiz and describe the "Model of Communication," and she didn't say true or false to a question on perception. She didn't just research and report on "time management." Instead, she gathered her strength, took the initiative, and caused an interpersonal communication moment to happen that transformed her life.

## **Student Tale #2**

New class, new story. Each spring, I teach a grant-supported dual enrollment communication class. The students are high school seniors. Many are from low-income scenarios, but they are students who want to go to college. In this class, Brianna (pseudonym) gives a speech on color blindness. Why? Because she has that condition. Not as typical for a female as a male, she notes. She describes her view of life as mostly gray. She also mentions that there are color blindness corrective glasses, but they are not affordable for her. "One day I'll get them," she says. I look at the class and ask, "What should we do?" They begin a discussion and suggest contacting companies that produce the corrective glasses to see if someone would donate a pair. We talk about the incentives for a company, such as: recognition by a university, local publicity, and community service kudos. We identify two companies, and as a class, we contact them. Company #1 responds that it can't help out. Company #2 responds that not only will they provide glasses for the student, but also for 10 other individuals. Defining moment, young people see the importance of speaking out, interpersonally communicating in an unfamiliar context, and making the "ask." They understand that the worst someone can say is "no," but maybe "yes."

When the time came for Brianna to receive and try on her glasses, it was in front of a campus crowd. She agreed to allow her story to be shared with the public, and it ended up being covered by a local television station, plus a major city news affiliate of ABC-TV. Brianna had never seen red, but when she put on the glasses and spotted her friend's red hair (which she thought was black), she burst into tears. She walked around marveling at the whole new rainbow of colors now obvious to her. Barely a dry eye in the house, and all of us, including myself, seeing the power of communication. You know, the class and I could have listened to her story and done nothing. But the idea of creating an interpersonal message and sharing it with influential people created the "ask," which led to a unique result. Effective communication combined with experience shed light on a challenging condition and brought awareness to many.

The idea of taking a concept, surrounding it with effective interpersonal communication, and creating an experience to demonstrate that concept is powerful. Plus, it isn't just limited to certain types of courses. Lepp and Fierke (2017, p. 2) suggest that "simply memorizing information may not allow students the opportunity to understand how classroom information applies to actual practice." In addition, Kolb and Kolb (2005, p. 209) suggest that when students transition to college, they have been "conditioned by their previous educational experiences to be passive recipients of what they are taught." So, by introducing experiential learning, where students play an active role and have responsibility for their learning, it can change their entire outlook about learning.

### **Student Tale #3**

Our university, like many, offers a mandatory first-year experience course (FYE). The idea is to help the students transition from high school to college in a meaningful way. It's a big leap for many high schoolers to go from a very structured learning environment—bells ringing to manage time, guidance counselors reminding students of due dates, and principals instilling law and order—to the independence and responsibilities of being a college student. In many cases, too, students are leaving the comfort of friendships and social settings that they have been familiar with for years. To that end, the FYE class helps guide first-year students to embrace and understand how to survive in a different scenario with new goals/expectations and with diverse groups of people. I remember that when I was a first-year student, I cried for a month. The university campus was so big and so unfamiliar. In some lecture classes, there were hundreds of students, and I didn't know a soul. I remembered this when I was asked to teach the FYE course several years ago. In addition, a study on the idea of college "belonging" shows the importance of "social connectedness and campus friendship" (Bowman et al., 2018, p. 286). The conclusion of the study specifically encourages the promotion of "quality interpersonal relationships."

This in mind as I began my course planning, I decided there would be a team-oriented project in my class. That way students would not feel the aloneness and bewilderment I felt that first month of my first year. So, yes, my FYE students learn about university resources available to them. Yes, they learn about diversity and inclusion, and yes, they learn about advising, counseling, tutoring, and time management. But, instead of multiple papers and quizzes, I challenge them to come up with a community service project. This means creating an idea and turning it into a meaningful event. Brainstorming is a big part of every class. Students interact as a work team, communicating and negotiating. One semester, Matt (pseudonym) was in my class. Like many first-year students, he was quiet and reserved. He traveled to our commuter campus from a neighboring state, and unfortunately, he did not know a soul. You could almost sense his yearning to see someone familiar, as he watched pairs and groups of students interact because they had the good fortune of knowing each other from local high schools.

During one class early on, I asked each student what added benefit they wanted from their college experience besides academic success. I vividly remember Matt saying he wanted to do a spring break study abroad campus trip to learn about another culture, because he had never been outside of the United States. A few others echoed the thought of experiencing diversity through this type of trip. When it came time for the class to come up with a service project idea, someone suggested raising money to offset the cost of a study abroad trip for a student on our campus. Interesting, I thought. I mentioned it to a former student, now a business professional, at lunch one day. Because he had done a spring study abroad trip on our campus as an undergraduate, he thought it was a fantastic idea. In fact, he said he would match whatever amount the students raised, because the experience was so meaningful for him. The class was overwhelmed and excited as they began their project planning.

When I asked what to call it, Matt timidly raised his hand. You could sense his heart pounding and hesitancy to share. At the same time, he had become enthused about a project related to his personal goals. This empowered him to offer "We Are One World." The class loved it. That simple interpersonal comment changed everything for this student. Before long, Matt was working on a

logo with another student. With each day, he took on more and more of a leadership role and effectively helped manage and advertise the fundraiser. He suggested that students planning a study abroad trip write an essay on why they should be considered for the funding and that the class vote on the winning essay. In the end, the fundraiser was a huge success, and the class unanimously voted for Matt's essay, because it was heartfelt and showed his desire to explore diversity. To this day, Matt includes the service project, an experiential learning assignment, as a highlight on his resume, and he proudly shares in interviews the important work his class did to make someone's dream possible. Matt empowered himself in that FYE class because of a deep motivation and through his interpersonal expression. And he empowered me.

## **Student Tale #4**

Now and then, especially on small college campuses, instructors may have the same students in different courses. This usually happens within a discipline, where only a few faculty members teach all the courses in a major. It is quite unusual, though, for an instructor to have the same students in varied discipline courses. That's where my story of Luciana (pseudonym) begins. When I first met her, she was a high school senior at a small inner-city high school in a disadvantaged part of the city. The ethnicity of the students there is primarily from two cultural backgrounds, not diverse like the larger suburban high schools in the area. I was invited to teach a dual enrollment communication class there. A local grant was picking up the tab for selected students to complete a college course. Students in this small school wore uniforms to offset the cost of buying school clothes, and teachers shared classrooms because of a lack of space. I remember Luciana smiling meekly when she walked into class the first day. Although she knew and was comfortable with all her classmates, she was clearly timid and a bit unsure of me. While most of the other students were chatty and boisterous during class, Luciana always seemed to be in "listen only" mode.

That is, until it came time for her informative speech. She was having trouble picking a topic, so she came up to me after a class. I asked what she liked to do in her spare time. She said, "I love photography," to which I replied, "Well, there's your topic." Her eyes lit up like stars. Something as simple as picking a topic she was passionate about transformed her anxiety into interest and excitement. Her speech was personal and strong, as were her other speeches that followed. One day I asked her about college. She proudly told me she had a full scholarship to a state university. But, by the end of the semester, she changed her mind and enrolled at my campus, because she thought she might be more "comfortable" there. Estranged from some of her immediate family, Luciana began living on her own as a teen, while working and starting college. In the next two years, Luciana became my student in my first-year experience class and my advanced event planning class. She was also my advisee. In retrospect, Luciana has said that my urging of "communicate it and do it" in all my courses empowered her to reach out from her timidity to look for and grab life opportunities.

The biggest illustration of this came from her part-time job at a nationally known gas/food/grocery chain store. She had a brainstorm one day that she researched and planned out, regarding beverage products. Because the business used a strategy of "customize and mix sandwich ingredients," she thought why not do the same for beverages, particularly hot beverages? When she learned that the corporate CEO planned to visit her location, she put together a business plan surrounding her idea. It was a busy day when he visited, so she was multitasking constantly. But, as he was getting ready

to leave, she boldly asked him for a few minutes of his time. She gave him her plan, which he reviewed with great interest. He told her he would present her ideas to his product development team, and he told her that her visionary spirit could mean a job with their corporate office when she graduated. She made the “ask”; she confidently communicated; and she again was empowered by communication. This young woman has made numerous other “asks” since that day. She started a small business, asked for a local internship, and found her way to graduate from college debt-free. She also fulfilled her dream to work for that CEO and his corporation just recently. I feel amazed and humbled that the power and utilization of communication and experiential learning can free a person and change their life.

So, in reflection, I do so through two sets of eyes. One is of my own. The other is through the eyes of students via their reactions/responses to what I encourage them to do in class and in life. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11) depicts a process of “transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it.” I have repeatedly determined that my focus on interpersonal communication and experiential learning in my courses has benefited my students. The relevance and importance of interpersonal communication can be life changing. In an article on our fears of communication (Seltzer, 2008, paragraphs 1-9), the author equates the thought of having to communicate as a “phobia” for many. He says we tend to “close ourselves off to one-on-one communication.” We see it as “fraught with danger and uncertainty.” Such an irony, since cultivating interpersonal skills is a key to personal success. Couple this with experiential learning, and one can bring out the best in students and prepare them for the rigors of life and professional success.

I am lucky that the courses I teach lend themselves so naturally to developing communication skills and incorporating experience. I do, however, believe that any course can and should have a creative component that nurtures the development of strong interpersonal skills. Whether an individual aspires to be a technological professional, an architect, an accountant, a psychologist, or a historian, the path is always challenging. When students are encouraged to demonstrate and apply concepts and ideas via interpersonal communication and through experiences, the more they empower themselves and strengthen their resolve to be successful.

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