

## SAGE Student Success online platform

### Communication and interpersonal skills: module overview

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Have you ever wondered why it is called ‘the *art* of communication’ rather than ‘the *science* of communication’? It is because communication is not a precise science, which can be calculated precisely, then checked to see if it works, then recalibrated according to a table of rules. Instead, communication is often something we *feel*. It is not precise, it is not rigid, and our approach changes with every interaction.

This is not even something we think about very often, which is a bit surprising, given how important it is. We tend to consciously ponder our interpersonal skills a little more, especially if something is going wrong for us, but of course these skills depend on our ability to communicate well, and that is a principle that underlies everything in this module.

We want to support you at every stage of your time on campus, so the topics in this module are designed to take you through the journey that you face. We begin with making the right *first impression*, and you will notice that it is not a ‘good’ first impression, but the ‘right’ first impression for you. You are trying to give a good account of yourself, of course, but you are also trying to give a true sense to others of the person you are, what you have to offer and what you expect from those around you. You will have many first impression opportunities as you study, meeting new people and being introduced to new situations, so even if you are already partway through your course, this topic is worth visiting.

As you study you will recognise changes in your sense of self and where you sit in the world; it is a good chance to try out how ‘the new you’ interacts with your surroundings. It is also a time when you need to understand how the *world of academic communication* works. There are obvious benefits to this: you will get more out of your course if you know how to work well with the academic and support staff and within the wider campus system. There is also the slightly less obvious benefit of time: you will save yourself time if you know how to engage well in this world. Long term, you will also want to continue

some of this communication into your professional life: an excellent reference is hard to give if an academic does not really know (or remember!) the student.

There is one area of academic communication that has become increasingly important in recent times: *online communication*. Formal elements of your learning, such as online seminars and lectures, online exams and assessment, are well structured and you will be given instructions as you go. Our work with you here will be to help you make the most of these online opportunities. Less formal elements of your learning life, such as groupwork with other students, or online research, will require you to find your own way to the best outcomes, so we will help you there too.

University is an excellent place to develop those more sophisticated communication techniques that will support your interpersonal skills throughout your life. The beauty of life on campus is that you have time to try out new techniques in a relatively low-risk environment, then to finesse and develop those techniques in line with the person you are (or are becoming) and the future you see for yourself.

That is what the skill *maximising your communication opportunities* is designed to achieve. It will take you through the skills you need to develop to function at the highest level, both now and in the future. You will learn how to listen well, how to project yourself (both verbally and through your body language) and how to develop a successful 'personal brand'. You will also be able to explore emotional awareness within relationships, so that you become more adept at working with others.

All of this will prepare you well for the section on *assertiveness*. Our aim here is to help you explore how you came to be who you are and how you might develop assertiveness techniques within your everyday life. With these tools in place, you will be able to set clear boundaries for your interaction with others, to assert your sense of fairness and to listen productively to those around you. Learning to be assertive is a good step in making your academic life both easier and more successful.

For many students, assertiveness is enough: this allows them to work in groups to produce the best outcomes, to stand up for their rights and those of others, and to make sure that they get what they need from each learning situation. For some students, though, the ability to be assertive is part of an interest in *leadership* and its twin skill, *negotiation*. If you are not taking a course in

business or politics you might not expect leadership to be part of the remit of your studying life, but it is something that every student can usefully explore.

You have plenty of opportunities to try your leadership skills on campus, from leading a study group to setting up a group project, from running for a post as a student rep to advocating for your political views. You might find that you dislike the leadership elements of study life, which is a useful outcome, and the leadership skills we will help you try out here will give you a firm sense of whether you want to consider leadership as part of your professional self in future.

Whether or not leadership appeals to you, negotiation is going to be part of your study life. Once you start noticing it, you will find that you are actively negotiating every day. Some of this negotiation barely gets a thought (where are you going with your friends later? Did you choose that activity? Do you like it? Do you care?). Some of it is more urgent (are you getting your say within a group project? Do you find yourself doing too much work for too little credit?). Some of it might never have crossed your mind as an option (can you change seminar or class group to work at a better time for you? Does the assessment topic have any wiggle room? Can you change your course, or your tutor, or both?).

Once you are armed with negotiation skills you are more likely to spot opportunities to negotiate, giving yourself a learning journey that is very well suited to your interests and that makes the most of the ways in which you like to learn and be assessed. We have included in this module one form of assessment that relies very heavily on your communication skills: a formal *presentation*. This is the ideal setting to show off your skills, and the practical support we offer here will help you to succeed. It will also allow you to enjoy those informal situations where presentation skills are an asset, such as group learning events.

As with many of your study skills, giving an excellent presentation comes with time, hard work and plenty of practice, but it also relies on good feedback. Your lecturers, seminar leaders, tutors and mentors will all be working hard to give you the best possible feedback, but the process relies on you being able to listen, understand and internalise that feedback. This is not an easy process for any of us, and it will challenge your communication skills, so we have dedicated a whole section to the topic of *feedback and active listening*.

Throughout this module you are encouraged to think about barriers to effective communication, and we will be showing you techniques to overcome some of the more overt of these barriers. We will do this by encouraging you to be an active listener, an effective team player and an assertive individual. One barrier, though, might be less overt. It could even be something you have not considered before: *how to make your communication inclusive*. We live in a world that quite rightly expects inclusive communication, and your success on campus is going to demand that you work with others in a way that is fair and inclusive.

This is not just about being a citizen of your world, it is also about success. Working alongside everybody else in a way that is inclusive, knowing that others will also be including you in their communication, is the only way to guarantee that you are all on the same page at the outset. Whatever challenges you encounter as you work alongside others (and there will be many of these, of course) you can face them positively and with energy, knowing that being inclusive will not be one of those challenges.

Developing your communication and fostering great interpersonal skills is not always easy. It asks you to break old habits and develop new ones; it requires you to think deeply about yourself and where you sit in the world, then it necessitates a renegotiation with that world and how you operate most effectively in it. Sounds like hard work? It is, but you do have time. Little and often is the best way. Try out a new technique, see it work in action and then get into the habit of using that skill until it is second nature. Then, move onto the next area you want to tackle. It is a lengthy process, but it is vital to your success as a student. Once you have read the skill *reaching into the career market*, you will see that it is a skill that will transfer easily into your career, setting you up for success, and positive relationships, for the rest of your life.

### **Suggested Readings**

1. Leal, B. C. (2017). *4 Essential Keys to Effective Communication in Love, Life, Work--Anywhere!* Van Haren Publishing.
2. Hopkins, D., & Reid, T. (2020). *Work Well in Groups (Super Quick Skills)* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
3. Bremen, E. (2019). *Say This, Not That to Your Professor: 20 Talking Tips for College Success* (3rd ed.). Cognella Academic Publishing.
4. Ponting, H. (2019). *Speak Up : How to ask for what you want, talk about what matters and make yourself heard*. Rethink Press.

5. Hasson, G. (2015). *How to Deal With Difficult People: Smart Tactics for Overcoming the Problem People in Your Life* (1st ed.). Capstone.

### **Self-Assessment**

I am worried about making the right first impression on campus (maps onto skill 1 First Impressions)

I am nervous about communicating well with academics and support staff (maps onto skill 2 The World of Academic Communication)

I am not familiar with learning online (maps onto skill 3 Online Communication)

I want to make the most of any communication opportunities open to me as I study (maps onto skill 4 Maximising Your Communication Opportunities)

I struggle to be assertive (maps onto skill 5 Being Assertive)

I tend not to negotiate well and I would like to explore my leadership qualities (maps onto skill 6 Leadership and Negotiation)

I worry about whether I will be able to give a successful presentation (maps onto skill 7 Giving a Successful Presentation)

I have never taken a particularly active approach to the feedback on my work (maps onto skill 8 Feedback: Active Listening for a Shared Understanding)

I recognise the need to be inclusive in how I communicate (maps onto skill 9 Inclusive Communication)

I want to make sure that my developing communication skills help me get into a good career (maps onto skill 10 Reaching into the Career Market)