

Collaborative Communication:

ASPECTS AND ASSUMPTIONS OF A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE MODEL

A model of collaborative communication stems from W. Isaacs's work (1999) on dialogue and is brought forward by J. Peters (1991, & Armstrong 1998; & Schumann, 2012) in terms of reflective practice. Using reflective practice enhances group communication and promotes "thinking together" critically and creatively.

This collaborative communication model was developed by Peters through work with faculty and community practitioners, with less focus on solving intractable problems (as emphasized by Isaacs) and more focus on deep thinking as a group, on building critical and creative thinking for meetings and classroom practice. Collaborative communication is based on several key inter-related assumptions about adult learning and effective methods for training professional practitioners.

FOUR KEY ASSUMPTIONS

Dialogue is Key to Reaching Group Understanding: One assumption is that dialogue is the preferred mode of communicating used by participants who are genuinely interested in understanding one another. When participants engage in dialogue with one or more other persons in order to understand what they mean, all participants are encouraged to open themselves to others' influence and, if so, they are very likely to learn something about themselves as well as the other persons. This dual nature of dialogue is ideal for learning from our own and others' practical experiences.

Making Meaning Together: One of the most effective forms of learning consists of making meaning of what we already know and do. This includes knowledge gained from reflecting on past experiences and knowledge yet to be developed by reflecting on and in new experiences. We value learning from experts but should also consider the kinds of learning that result from the learner's own knowledge about what works and doesn't work in their practices. In one's own development or that of others, consider ways in which people may do things differently, act in new ways they select, and reflect on the results of their new experience. Participants identify and reflect on their past actions and the assumptions that helped drive these actions. We can stand to learn from reflecting on both our past actions and our real-time actions.

Thinking Together is More: Although reflective practice is often confused with introspection or individualized meta-cognition, the collaborative communication model is also based on the assumption that reflective practice involves more than what one can do wholly alone. Thus, collaborative learning experiences are central to developing ourselves and others—each participant learns by reflecting on their own experiences AND from reflecting on other participants' experiences. They also learn WITH other participants, as they jointly develop new ideas and ways of enhancing their practices. Individuals and groups learn more as a result of powerful learning experiences shared as a group and processed as a group than if he/she acted entirely alone. This is done in dialogue with other experienced practitioners. We slow down our actions, think with others about their unique practice, and jointly create new ideas for their practices.

Pacing and Giving Space to Reflection: Learning new ideas and ways of practicing requires time to reflect on one's actions. There is a pace to learning this way. Ideally, sessions are spread over a specific, paced, period of time, during which participants are able to step back from their intensive work and reflect on their experiences together. There might be a few days or a few weeks between sessions, so that participants can have an opportunity to apply some of the things they learned as they return to daily practices. In turn, each person's experiences can serve as the basis of the next dialogue session. (Note: all dialogues about professional experiences are expected to be held in confidence.)

SEVEN HABITS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATION

To start a group dialogue, review the assumptions above and then focus on one or more of the following skill areas.

- 1. Climate Building** --- Creating an environment in which participants have a sense of safety and respect, supportive of a collaborative relationship among all participants.
Guidelines: Use standard climate building activities at the start of a dialogue, such as sharing something from one's personal life, personal goals, or anecdotes.
- 2. Questioning** --- Asking questions that help participants identify their assumptions, clarify their thoughts, and develop fair and balanced expectations of the educational development process.
Examples: During dialogue, the participant listener can ask "Can you say more?" and "What is your thinking?" After answering a direct question, one might ask "I'm curious, why did you ask that?" Remember to ask open-ended questions.
- 3. Listening** --- Skillful listening to participants' mental models, wants, assumptions, and values.
Guidelines: Be fully present to what others are saying. Avoid "reloading" (thinking ahead about what you're going to say instead of listening). Listen for the group's emerging topic.
- 4. Focusing** --- Seeing, hearing, and tracking what each participant says and how they say it, moment to moment, individually and jointly.
Guideline: remembering back (listening for the sequence of the discussion—can you go seven people back and remember what they said)?
- 5. Thinking** --- Identifying and suspending one's own frames, assumptions, values, and biases, in order to understand one's own and others' viewpoints and behaviors. It's a balancing act with the task of focusing by staying aware of your thoughts (without planning your next statement).
Guidelines: check one's own assumptions, check each other's assumptions through question: can you say more, can you tell me why?
- 6. Acting** --- Taking next steps based on critical reflection of one's own and others' thoughts, feelings, and actions.
Guideline: Think Kolb's experiential model: new ideas are applied to the world. The difference, though, between reflective practice and Kolb's reflection, is that Kolb's is a "reflective observation" and reflective practice involves creating together.
- 7. Facilitation** --- Enabling conditions that create and sustain dialogue by participants.
Guideline: A facilitator encourages critical thinking among the group, helps focus around an emerging idea, stops side conversations, and may call a "time out" to ask, "What are we talking about now?"
Facilitators may also ask participants to start a session with a round of short comments and end a session with a session debrief, asking participants "how was that for you" or "what is your take-away"?

Participants are encouraged to step away from "expert" and "novice" roles. The facilitator's role similar to the professor in an active learning classroom, sharing responsibility with the participants.

Participants themselves practice the behaviors listed above by using the guidelines during group dialogue. In time, they move beyond explicit practice of the habits to organic methods of contribution to dialogue, adding action, and developing their own facilitation skills. Having a skilled facilitator who can provide feedback is very helpful but equally helpful is a group of practitioners working together.

Adapted from Peters & Schumann, 2012.

Peters, J. M. & Schumann, D. (2012). Seven aspects of reflective practice: assumptions and aspects. Unpublished document. The University of Tennessee, Institute for Collaborative Communication, Knoxville, TN.

Other foundational resources

Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the art of thinking together*. NY: Doubleday.

Peters, J. M. (1991). Strategies for Reflective Practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 51(Fall), 89–96. doi:10.1002/ace.36719915111

Peters, J. M., & Armstrong, J. L. J. (1998). Collaborative Learning: People Laboring Together to Construct Knowledge. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1998(79), 75–85. doi:10.1002/ace.7908

For mentoring

Magolda, M. B. B., & King, P. M. (2008). Toward reflective conversations: An advising approach that promotes self-authorship. *Peer Review*, 10(1), 8. <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/toward-reflective-conversations-advising-approach-promotes-self>

Practical plan for guiding students to describe and make sense of their experiences through reflection. “The shift to self-authorship occurs when students encounter challenges that bring their assumptions into question, have opportunities to reflect on their assumptions, and are supported in reframing their assumptions into more complex frames of reference.”

See further resources in Collaborative Communication in Mentoring: Annotated Sources (pdf)
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