

MENTORING **SPARK**

Quick ideas to light up your doctoral conversations.

► COMMUNICATION



SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Methods of communication (*as well as word choice, tone, etc.*) have changed significantly in the last 20 years (*e.g., popularity of texting*) resulting in frustrations by multiple generations on the “best” way to communicate.

A common communication problem is for someone to send out a message they believe is clear and have it received with a different meaning. The reason for confusion may not be the word choice, but rather how those words are delivered. Its important to understand that communication involves context, words used, and agreement of all cues (*e.g., verbal, body language, tone; written words, fonts, styles, and punctuations*). Increasing one’s awareness of communication style can help improve accurate communication and reduce frustration.



FACULTY FYI

This **Spark** is intended to help students understand that communication is more than just words.

Good communication is important for the advisor/advisee relationship, and for the advisor’s lab efficiency. Thus, the time spent modeling and supporting students with good communication skills will pay dividends in the long run, including by reducing misunderstandings that can delay research progress.

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A RESOURCE FROM:



Use this QR code to access this and other Mentoring Spark tip sheets:



► LEVEL 1

LEVEL 1: COMMUNICATION MODES

LEVEL 2: UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

LEVEL 3: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION



ACTIONS FOR FACULTY

- Facilitate a discussion with students on modes of communication. Talk about how each person interprets tone, body language, approaches, written fonts, and styles differently. It is important for the student to understand this is an open dialogue to learn from each other and not intended to determine what is “right or wrong”.
- Ask students to think about their tone and body language (*if verbal*), written styles (*email or text*) during communications with peers, faculty, friends.
- Help students think about communication as a research, networking, and life skill – not as a personality trait. There is always room to grow with this skill.
- Discuss the pros and cons of using AI to assist in writing emails.

CONTINUED ...



DIGGING DEEPER

- As appropriate, suggest that students read about the basics of body language and tone.
- A best-practice resource for communication is having a trusted other (*friend, mentor, partner*) to candidly help with one's communication, especially the "vibe" they give. The feedback should be supportive, truthful, and include strengths and opportunities for improvement.
- Use video as a tool (*could be Zoom, Teams, or actual video*). For example, record oneself during a variety of scenarios. The video can be used for a self-review of tone, body language, word choice, etc.
- Toastmasters – though this takes an hour a week, Toastmasters is an excellent resource for improving overall presentation and speaking skills.
- **Reflection as a Tool:** Consider how often others ask for clarification and if it is more often with any particular communication mode. Think of ways to reduce the number of unclear communications.
- AI is a tool to help write emails and other correspondence with a particular tone; however, one must understand the appropriate tones to use AI correctly.
- Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experience in Research (CIMER) Framework for Communication.

Please visit the RDI Mentoring Sparks website for examples and links to these tools and resources!



ACTIONS FOR FACULTY

- Help students think about when to use which communication channel (*in-person, phone, text, email*) – include what is expected from your perspective and how/why it may be different than communicating with friends, family, or members of one's network.
- Discuss with students that the communication channel and mode/tone vary depending on the recipient of the message – that does not mean not being true to oneself; it *does* mean having consideration for the recipient.
- **GOAL Setting:** Agree on a communication mode to modify that will result in better communication – that is, others will interpret that communication with more accuracy.



EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS

1. Research group role-playing – assign students as a presenter or receiver and ask them to take on different roles – the presenter may be very quiet or timid or loud and demanding, the receiver may be interested (*leaning in, looking at presenter*) or uninterested (*leaning back, arms crossed, looking at phone, emailing*).
 - a. Discuss how the different roles with essentially the same words took on different meanings.
 - b. Have students discuss how the different roles made them feel (*conducting the role or watching the role*). Note! The different roles are parts being played, and not a reflection on the student.
2. Have students ask a few people from different groups (*e.g., a peer, network member, employer*) to provide constructive feedback on the student's communication. What is good, what could be improved.
3. Have students think about what they like and dislike about others' communication habits, and what, if anything, they may want to do with their habits based on those learning experiences.
4. Have students bring in an email, text, or other communication that did not go as planned. If they do not have one handy, have them write an email asking for help (could be analyzing data, a class, using equipment, etc). Have students pass those around the research group for feedback.

Consider how often others ask for clarification...



REFLECTION & NEXT STEPS

- **Student and Faculty:** Are you communicating in a manner you think is best for the recipient?
- Think about how you want to be understood and what that means for understanding others.



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