My Favorite Assignment: Support Materials

ABC Denver 2023

Aaron T. Phillips, University of Utah

I.   Instructions to Students

Your assignment is to "reach out" and have a conversation with someone you don't know well or don't know at allLinks to an external site.. This can be someone on campus—a fellow student, a professor or TA, someone from the same student club as you. It can also be someone off campus—somebody on the ski lift, train, bus, whatever! After engaging this person in conversation, you will submit a video reflection in which you note what you learned. How you felt before, during, and after the interaction will be important elements of your reflection. In addition, this experience will help you operationalize the theoretical material we have been learning regarding active listening (week 1 videos) and uncertainty reduction.

Spend some time brainstorming and discussing this assignment with your instructor, other students, friends and family, etc. to buffer the awkwardness you will likely feel when reaching out to someone in this way.

You should make sure this is a safe conversation in a safe context. Your safety is #1. If you feel uncomfortable with this assignment at any point, please let me know.

Rationale: Research has shown that the best leaders can communicate effectively with nearly anybody. They also have developed the ability to manage difficult conversations. Together, these characteristics form the behavioral scaffolding for what I call communication resilience. Moreover, effective communicators have a way of connecting with people by finding commonality with their interlocutors, even when it might not seem apparent at first blush.

Nearly all of us feel reticence when it comes to opening a difficult conversation, whether due to the conversation's content or simply not knowing our interlocutor well. This assignment will give us a chance to develop the communication superpower of being able to talk to anybody by doing the difficult (and, let's face it, sometimes awkward) work of starting a conversation "cold."

Script: You may approach this conversation in your own way; you don't need to use a script. But if the scaffolding of a script will help you, you can say something like "I've been assigned to talk to somebody I don't know as part of a class on business communication. Would you be willing to chat with me for a few minutes to help me with this assignment?"

Conversation notes: Once you have finished this conversation, take some time to record a voice memo or jot down some notes. What did you talk about? What surprised you? Did the conversation go places you wouldn't have expected? What is your reaction in terms of thought and feeling? See below for specific guidance, including what course material to bring into this analysis.

Deliverables (<u>what to upload</u>): 1) Please write a one to one-and-a-half page memo (formatted appropriately, as shown by many examples in the textbook) addressing how the principles of Uncertainty Reduction Theory and/or mirroring. played out in the conversation. In addition, please reference the video on active listening (see the early course modules) at least once.

<u>Grading</u>: I will grade the written component on organization, development of your ideas, understanding of material, and written quality overall.

    II.   Links to Online Material

<u>Rationale</u>: Sandstrom et al., 2022, Talking to strangers: a week-long intervention reduces psychological barriers to social connection:
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103122000750

<u>Theory to connect to assignment</u>: Mark Redmond, Communication textbook chapter on Berger & Calabrese's (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory:
https://dr.lib.iastate.edu/entities/publication/8f725318-911e-41ab-8f3f-a095c24b1ba7

Nonverbals and "Mirroring": https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2011/05/31/the-art-and-science-of-mirroring/?sh=5f4c0e181318