The Listening Circle: Using the SBI Model to Enhance Peer Feedback

Rick Bommelje

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Q1: Au: This should be labeled as a figure and referred to as figure 1. Please provide figure caption and indicate where the in-text callout should be placed.
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Rick Bommelje

Department of Communication, Rollins College

The Listening Circle is a learning activity that is designed to provide students with the opportunity to connect listening knowledge with observed behaviors and to strengthen student peer feedback. Not knowing how to give feedback can result in messages that are confusing, tactless, and counter-productive. Many feedback messages leave the receiver unsure of what to do with the information. By using a process that was developed by Sloan Weitzel of the Center for Creative Leadership, the Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI) model has been adapted for this activity. Students are able to learn and practice a structure that helps keep feedback focused and relevant and increases the likelihood the feedback will be received in a clear, nondefensive manner by their peers. Concise, clear, and meaningful peer feedback is essential to learning and to sound assessment practice.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing the activity, students will be able to:

- Connect listening concepts with behaviors.
- Give and receive effective peer feedback.
- Recognize positive and negative listening behaviors.
- Describe the specific impact of a listening behavior.
- Acquire a listening concepts vocabulary.

PROCEDURAL DETAILS

Arrange the room so that there are two to three concentric circles depending on the size of the group, with the center circle having four chairs.

The instructor introduces the activity by announcing, “It’s time for the Listening Circle and we have four chairs in the center that are waiting to be occupied.” This prompts members of the class to self-select who will sit in the inner circle and also establishes a learning environment that fosters commitment rather than forced compliance. This activity is designed to be implemented in the majority of the class sessions during the term so that a pattern of practice can be established.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rick Bommelje, Department of Communication, Rollins College, 1000 Holt Avenue, Winter Park, FL 32789. E-mail: rbommelje@rollins.edu
Everyone in the class will have the opportunity to be in the inner circle. If members are unwilling to occupy all of the seats, the instructor extends specific invitations.

The instructor announces the topic for the dialogue to the entire group. The topic serves as a focus point for the dialogue and is listening-related in some manner. Following are examples of the types of topics that can be used:

- Quote: “Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people don’t know the difference.” — David Augsberger
- Scene from *Apollo 13*: Flight Operations Director Gene Kranz’s meeting with his team about how to reduce carbon dioxide levels (2 minutes).
- The sound of a Rin gong.
- Dilbert cartoon on listening.
- Song: *Sound of Silence* by Simon and Garfunkel.
- A provocative photo.
- A single word, for example, Compassion.
- Parable: “Sound of the Forest.”

In addition to the instructor selecting the focus point topic, other options for selection can include students submitting ideas prior to each class session and randomly selecting one or asking for a volunteer to announce a focus point topic for the activity.

There are 3 stages in the activity:

*Stage 1.* The four members in the center circle have eight minutes to dialogue the meaning of the focus point. Participants in the outer circles listen to the dialogue and use the SBI technique as a framework for observation. They also associate a specific listening concept that has been covered in a previous session to their peer observation. The activity lasts for the entire time duration, even if there is sustained silence.

*Stage 2.* Upon conclusion of the timeframe in Stage 1, the instructor asks for SBI feedback, striving to get the maximum number of observations in a four-minute timeframe and also delivered in the prescribed format.

*Stage 3.* The final stage of the activity is a three-minute summary session to glean the key learning points. There are several variations of the summary that include one of the following: 1) Invite students to verbally provide a response in one or two sentences and striving to get as
many learning points shared in the timeframe; 2) invite one student to deliver an impromptu three-
minute presentation on key learning points; and 3) invite students to free write for two minutes
to capture their learning points and in the final minute asking for several students to read their
written responses.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND/OR A BRIEF RATIONALE

Peer feedback provides students much more immediate and frequent feedback than one instructor
can possibly deliver (Topping, 1998). Most importantly, the research finds that peer learning and
assessment help students develop communication skills, the ability to collaborate, critical think-
ing, and habits of life-long learning (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999; Topping, 1998). Peer
feedback is well worth improving. However, the common shortfalls of student peer feedback
include that it is the following: too lenient or uncritical, focused on whether the evaluator likes or
agrees with a work rather than its quality, overly critical and harsh, inaccurate, and superficial.

The listening circle is a peer-learning strategy in which the majority of participants in a class
are in an outer circle and four students are in the center. Everyone in the class is engaged in the
activity. Those in the center participate in a dialogue (Senge, 2006) about a focus point, other-
wise known as a “third thing” (Palmer, 2004). A third thing is a transcendent something that has
a voice of its own beyond the students and the instructors. Examples include a poem, piece of
artwork, song, scene from a film, or short story. The participants in the inner circle partake in a
dialogue to seek meaning of the third thing with each other. In dialogue, individuals gain insights
that could not be derived individually. The result is a free exploration that maximizes people’s
experiences and thought yet moves beyond their individual views (Senge, 2006). Upon comple-
tion of the dialogue, participants in the outer circle make specific descriptive observations about
what they saw or heard in the center circle. They assess the interaction of the center group using
the SBI technique (Weitzel, 2003). Effective feedback is built around three ideas: 1) Focus on the
situation, 2) describe the other person’s behavior you observed in that situation, and 3) describe
the impact that behavior had on you. The result is a message that is clear and that can inspire
action and productive change.

The approximate time required for this activity is 15 minutes; however, the time frames can
be increased for each stage depending on the instructor’s purpose.

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

This activity teaches students how to develop, deliver and debrief effective peer feedback in a
listening situation. It is based on observable behavior and reinforces to the listener the impor-
tance of delivering concise, clear, and meaningful messages to a peer. The instructor should serve
as a coach to ensure that the SBI technique is followed and that there is a connected listening
concept delivered. The intent of effective feedback is to influence the peer to begin, continue, or
stop behaviors that affect performance. Not knowing how to give effective feedback can result in
messages that are easily misinterpreted and confusing. This activity also emphasizes the impor-
tance of offering specific feedback rather than sharing general statements. Students gain practice
on commenting on both positive and nonproductive behaviors. Following are two examples:
1. Positive Listening Behavior

Step 1: Capture the Situation
(“In the Listening Circle . . . ”)

Step 2: Describe the Behavior
(“I observed Sandi asking Ted a key question . . . Ted, how did that make you feel?”)

Step 3: Deliver the Impact
(“This energized the tempo of the communication and added new information for consideration.”)

The observer concludes by linking to the listening concept(s).
(“Sandi was demonstrating comprehensive listening by probing in order to clarify and check for understanding. Additionally, by asking how Ted felt, she linked to the cathartic purpose of communication.”)

2. Non-productive listening behavior

Step 1: Capture the Situation
(“In the Listening Circle . . . ”)

Step 2: Describe the Behavior
(“I observed Glen with his arms folded throughout the entire time period, he did not make eye contact with any of the other group members, and only made one verbal contribution, which was one word, ‘Really.’”)

Step 3: Deliver the Impact
(“This made me feel uncomfortable for the other group members.”)

The observer concludes by linking to the listening concept(s).
(“This connects to discriminative listening, especially kinesics and oculrics. It also made me question if the transactional model of communication was minimized because of this behavior.”)

Upon conclusion of Stage 3, students debrief the key listening concepts that have been covered during the activity. This reinforces the language of listening that is being taught during the course.

REFERENCES


