



Managing Difficult Conversations

Competency

Educator demonstrates the understanding and skills necessary to effectively handle difficult conversations with a student teacher candidate that will result in a positive outcome.

Key Method

The educator reflects on previous experiences and analyzes their own strengths in handling difficult conversations. The educator applies skills for effective communication, listening without bias, and collaborative discussion to help move conversations toward positive outcomes.

Method Components

An educator who is aware of their own communication strengths and weaknesses will be able to have a better self-understanding of the skills needed to help facilitate constructive outcomes when challenging conversations arise.

Communicating

Difficult conversations can be approached from a variety of angles. In managing difficult conversations with a teacher candidate, a cooperating teacher should be attentive to the approach. Two such styles are “calling out” and “calling forth/calling in.” The calling out approach can be seen as adversarial and can often lead to tension and defensiveness. The calling forth/in approach is seen as collaborative and motivational. Understanding and approaching conversations using a calling in technique should be considered prior to engagement.



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Feedback

Being aware of the different strategies and techniques for providing feedback is useful during the student teaching experience. Educators will provide objective feedback instead of opinions and subjective feedback. Providing feedback built upon evidence from the classroom experience helps the student teacher candidate set goals for improvement. One strategy for providing feedback may include the **SBI Model**:

- Describe the **situation**,
- Describe the observable **behavior**, and
- Describe what you thought or felt in reaction (**impact**) to the behavior.

Listening

When difficult conversations arise, stay calm and take time to reflect on the situation. Look at both sides of the issue by using empathic understanding – seek to understand. Use non-biased active listening skills and be cognizant of your verbal and nonverbal communication. When having difficult conversations, one should pay particular attention to both verbal and nonverbal forms. Both can have an impact on the effectiveness of communication between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher candidate.

Collaborative Discussion

While the cooperating teacher is the facilitator of the conversation, both parties should have interactive dialogue to address possible solutions for moving forward. This demonstrates a vote of confidence in the idea of the teacher candidate and honors the expertise of the cooperating teacher.

Managing Difficult Conversations

Communicating

Name the situation – The situation identifies the full context. The full context includes the people involved, location, timing, the naming of the issue/matter/event of focus.

- *Example 1: “We should discuss the attire that you are wearing at school today.”*
- *Example 2: “Let’s talk about the language you used yesterday during your lesson when talking about undocumented students.”*



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Observable Behavior

State the observable behavior – The observable behaviors include an objective account of what occurred. It addresses what happened with as much detail as possible. It should not presume possible reasons for the occurrences. The step should be approached with caution, as subjective and assumptive judgments can permeate what should be an objective report.

- *Example 1: “You are wearing a shirt with offensive language printed on the front.”*
- *Example 2: “During your lesson, you said that ‘those people’ do not belong in our country.”*

Impact

The impact of the behavior should be discussed in context. It should answer the question or help the teacher candidate identify what the impact of the behavior is both for themselves and their students. During the explanation of impact, the “feedback sandwich” can be used.

- *Example 1: “Thank you for regularly being attentive to your attire. As per school rules, graphics cannot be offensive. This shirt puts you in the position of being out of compliance with school rules. You have been clear about your respect for compliance. Thank you for that.”*
- *Example 2: “I am glad that you are willing to tackle difficult and sensitive issues through open discussion. However, the language that you are using and your stance on the topic should be attended to more carefully as it could put students, especially those who are undocumented or have parents who are undocumented, in a very awkward and uncomfortable position. I could see the looks of sadness and dismay on the faces of some students as you spoke.”*

Listening

Following the detailed outlining of the issue, the teacher candidate should be given a chance to be heard. The cooperating teacher should prepare to listen to the objective position of the teacher candidate. This should be done through the use of effective listening skills, which include periodically asking questions to seek clarity, building the other party’s self-esteem by conveying confidence in them, and engaging cooperatively (in a non-disruptive/non-argumentative way) in the conversation.

Effective listening happens at various levels. The cooperating teacher should be attentive to the level of listening in which they are engaged (See What great listeners actually do).



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Collaborative Discussion

Finally, as part of the management of difficult conversations, solutions should be collaboratively generated and respected.

Solution – Possible solutions to the situation should be discussed. This may be done through questions or through direct requests. The manner in which this is approached should be based on 1) the cooperating teacher's understanding of the teacher candidate's style of learning and 2) the speed at which rectification needs to occur. Sometimes, time for reflection is necessary in order to generate possible solutions to more complex issues. Time for this brainstorming should be made available with a proposed reconvening to discuss solutions. The solution should have 1) an action required, 2) a time frame outlined, and 3) referral for further assistance if possible/necessary.

- *Example 1: "Please adjust your attire before students arrive. The counselor may have shirts for you to borrow for the day. Here is a copy of the policy in case you need one."*

AND/OR

- *"How can we fix this situation? How can I help?"*
- *Example 2: "There are great ways to make discussion a learning experience. Rather than giving your opinion, present the information to students and have them come to their own understanding while facilitating a discussion that demands that everyone in the classroom is respectful to everyone else."*

AND/OR

- *"What can we do to ensure that students are not put in a position that makes them feel devalued?"*

Supporting Rationale and Research

Farrell, M. (2015). Difficult Conversations. *Journal Of Library Administration*, 55(4), 302-311. doi:10.1080/01930826.2015.1038931

Sayeski, K., & Paulsen, K. (2012). Student Teacher Evaluations of Cooperating Teachers as Indices of Effective Mentoring. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 39(2), 117-130. Retrieved from

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23479675>



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Zenger, J. & Folkman, J. (2016). What great listeners actually do. Harvard Business Review.

<https://hbr.org/2016/07/what-great-listeners-actually-do>

Resources

Readings

[Eye of the Needle: A Communication Tool](#)

[SBI Model for Feedback](#)

[The Ladder of Inference-How to Avoid Jumping to Conclusions](#)

[The Left Hand Column Tool](#)

[Using Restorative Questioning: Stop Calling People Out](#)

Videos

[Brene Brown on Empathy](#)

[Five Ways to Listen Better](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3, and be proficient for all components in Part 2.

Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

300 to 500 words

Please use the suggested word count as a guide to answer the following contextual questions. This will help our assessor understand your current context for working on this micro-credential.

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.

Describe a situation where you had a difficult conversation with another person that did not result in a positive outcome. Provide an analysis of the communication that took place, and address the following in your analysis.

- Give a brief overview of the issue.
- Which parts of the conversation went well? What did not go well?



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- What were you feeling inside while the conversation was taking place? Why?
- What were some of the nonverbal communication components you noticed from yourself and from the other person?
- Were the background, perspective and experiences of the other person taken into consideration during the conversation?
- What was the end result of the conversation?
- How did you feel after the conversation was finished? Why?
- What could you have done differently?
- Tell about ways you could have managed the conversation differently.

Passing: Responses address each question. Writing is organized, easy to understand, and includes details that are directly connected to the overview of the issue described. In the final questions, the educator specifically focuses on their personal responsibility in managing and/or mismanaging the conversation.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credentials please submit the following 3 artifacts as evidence of your learning.

**Please do not include any information that will make you or your students identifiable to your reviewers.*

Artifact 1: Conversations

At least four possible conversations listed.

Create a list of possible conversations that might be the most difficult for you and a rationale for why you believe that aspect will be the most difficult for you. Follow this list with communication techniques that could be helpful. (Cultural differences, beliefs, etc.)

Artifact 2: Recordings

Recordings should be less than 5 minutes

Three different recordings (audio or video) or transcriptions of a mock difficult conversation.

- Ask a colleague to play the role of a teacher candidate as you conduct a conversation that might occur based on the list that you created.

Note: Inform colleagues that they may choose their temperament, emotional state, and any other personal characteristic they prefer. Consider having the colleague assume the role of someone who represents a different background and/or identity than your own.

Artifact 3: Self-Evaluation In your evaluation be sure to address the following:



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- Did I fully identify the situation? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If no, discuss why and/or how not.
- Was my description of the issue/event objective? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If no, discuss why and/or how not.
- Was I clear about the impact of the issue/event? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If no, discuss why and/or how not.
- Did I ensure that the mock teacher candidate and their perspective was heard with active listening and they felt supported? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If no, discuss why and/or how not.
- Did I ensure that the solutions were collaboratively generated? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If no, discuss why and/or how not.

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	Basic	Developing
Artifact 1: Conversations	Four possible conversations that could be difficult are listed with the reasoning and possible solutions rationally provided.	Four possible conversations that could be difficult are listed but reasoning OR possible solutions are not provided.	Less than four possible conversations that could be difficult are listed and reasoning OR possible solutions are not provided.
Artifact 2: Recordings	The educator demonstrates effective communication, including listening and collaboration techniques in all three role-play scenarios.	The educator demonstrates effective listening, OR communication, OR collaboration techniques in each of the three role-play scenarios. BUT the educator doesn't use all techniques.	The educator does not demonstrate effective communication or collaboration or listening techniques in any of the three role-play scenarios.
Artifact 3: Self Evaluation	The educator identifies the communication, listening, and collaboration techniques used in artifact 2 and	The educator does not identify the communication techniques used for each of the role-play scenarios. AND/OR	The educator does not identify the communication techniques used for any of the role-play scenarios.



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	provides a rationale for the use of the techniques for each role-play scenario.	The educator does not provide a rationale for the use of the techniques for each role-play scenario.	The educator does not provide a rationale for the use of the techniques for any of the role-play scenarios.
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Part 3 Reflection

Use the word count as a guide to write a personal reflection about your work on this micro-credential. For tips on writing a good reflection review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.

Write a response to the following questions for each difficult conversation and note how the conversation might be different with a different teacher.

250-word limit per conversation

- What was the easiest part of the conversation for you?
- What was the most difficult part of the conversation for you?
- If you had to have the same conversation again, what would you do differently?

Write a response to the following questions :

400 word limit

- Why is it important to have difficult conversations?
- What is important to consider before engaging in difficult conversations?
- What conditions have to be in place for a difficult conversation to have positive outcomes?

Passing: Responses thoughtfully address the impact of the educator’s current communication skills, and the educator provides other concepts that will aid in the communication process. Writing is organized and easy to understand.



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