

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTION: A BEHAVIORAL COMPETENCY APPROACH

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Teaching interpersonal communication fundamentals leads to an inevitable question: what is the essence of course content, and how can instructional procedures increase the likelihood that this material will have an impact on the communicative lives of students outside of the classroom? A behavioral competency approach involves students in active observation of their interpersonal behavior and guides them toward development and implementation of change in situations that are most critical to them.

As each new behavior is presented, students learn to observe its occurrence in their ongoing life experience and to plan its inclusion in target communication events. The goal is change. The premise is that preparation and rehearsal enhance interpersonal impact. The purpose is to provide students with skills to influence the interpersonal events in which they participate.

People do not develop interpersonal competence by understanding theory; the translation of learning from the classroom to the natural environment is not automatic. There is a difference between knowing and doing, and merely knowing about communication may have little impact on what people *do* when they communicate. Individuals have acquired their particular range and repertoire of interpersonal behaviors over a conditioning history as old as they are. Consequently, if change is actually to occur, the instructional process must be systematic and specifically targeted. This means that observable, recordable behavioral goals must initially be established.¹ When performance competencies are introduced, students know what to aim for, when they have succeeded, and precisely what to do differently when their performance is unsatisfactory.²

If we are to be successful in our efforts to teach people to observe, explain, and manage their interpersonal behavior, we must assist them to approach their communication scientifically, identifying the variables that influence their verbal and nonverbal behavior, manipulating those variables, and affecting outcome. To alter interpersonal communication, an individual must be aware of the environmental influences that maintain baseline patterns and possible options for change.

A behavioral approach to interpersonal communication involves students in the conscious implementation of interpersonal behaviors in actual life situations. Students learn to approach their own communicative behavior systematically, carefully collecting baseline data, introducing intervention strategies, and evaluating change.

Shaping is the process through which a target competency is divided into its basic components. Each component is introduced in increasing levels of difficulty until the entire complex of behaviors is mastered. Students are initially reinforced for a small approximation of the target behavior, and subsequently for more accurate represen-

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Through written practice, students learn to use a particular competency without the possible negative consequences of an oral communication event.

Once students have learned to write appropriate examples of a target interpersonal behavior, the next step in the shaping process is *self-monitoring*, identifying actual life situations in which the skill is pertinent. For each situation identified, students describe a skilled response they might have made. This description advances the process of behavior change by illustrating the operation of the target behavior in the natural environment. For example, students learning to paraphrase, describe actual life situations in which paraphrasing would have been appropriate. For each of the situations described, the student develops and records an effectively paraphrased response.

SITUATION (DESCRIBE OTHER'S STATEMENT)

My friend said to me, "I didn't finish my term paper, so now I can't go skiing. And I wanted to go so much."

POSSIBLE PARAPHRASE FOR THE SITUATION

"You sound really disappointed. Going skiing this weekend was important to you."

By self-monitoring situations which call for a target skill, students learn to recognize and utilize the behavior as it applies to their own communication environments.

Interpersonal behavior is further shaped as students observe others who effectively perform the target competency. In this way, the *modeling* component of the program involves observation of people in the student's natural environment. Individuals record the specific verbal and nonverbal components of the models' behavior, describing what they say and how they say it. Based on this information, students select communication behaviors to incorporate into their own expanding repertoires. Similarly, by observing negative models, people whose performance of the skill is inadequate, individuals discover particular behaviors to avoid. To illustrate both aspects of modeling, consider "saying no" as a target behavior. A student might use a roommate as an effective model:

My roommate was studying when her friend came in and asked her to go out to dinner. My roommate replied, "It sounds like fun, but I really *must* study tonight."

A negative model of the skill can also be described:

My friend's sister asked to borrow his car. He said, "I wish I could lend it to you, but I have to go grocery shopping." When his sister said she would drop him off and pick him up at the supermarket, he just said, "Okay. I guess so."

Based on the modeling component, students are able to specify particular behaviors to emphasize and avoid.

Following modeling, students are in a position to initiate *covert rehearsal*, the imaginary practice of specific scenes in which the new skill is utilized and reinforced. Individuals covertly practice actual dialogue, planning what they will say, how they will say it, and how the other might respond. This covert rehearsal system increases the likelihood that students will perform with comfort and skill in actual communica-

²Susan R. Glaser, *Toward Communication Competency: Developing Interpersonal Skills* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1980), pp. vii–viii.

³Hyman Hops, Hill M. Walker, and Charles R. Greenwood, "PEERS: A Program for Remediating Social Withdrawal in School," in *Behavioral Systems for the Developmentally Disabled: I School and Family Environments*, ed. L. A. Hamerlynck (New York: Brunner Margel, 1979), pp. 48–86; Susan R. Glaser and Anthony Biglan, "Increase Your Confidence and Skill in Interpersonal Situations," Unpublished manuscript, University of Oregon 1977, pp. 1–113.

⁴Anthony Biglan, Susan Glaser, and Michael Dow, "Conversational Skills Training for Social Anxiety: An Evaluation of Its Relevance and Effectiveness," Paper delivered at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Antonio, 1979, pp. 1–27.

⁵Rosemary O. Nelson, David P. Lipinski, and John L. Black, "The Effects of Expectancy on the Reactivity of Self-recording," *Behavior Therapy*, No. 6 (1975), pp. 337–349.

⁶Alan E. Kazdin, "Effects of Covert Modeling and Model Reinforcement on Assertive Behavior," *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, No. 4 (1973), pp. 1–6.

⁷Paul Friedman, "The Effect of Modeling and Role Playing on Assertive Behavior," in *Advances in Behavior Therapy*, ed. Rubin, Lazarus, Fensterheim, and Krans (New York: Academic Press, 1971), pp. 149–169.

⁸Michael J. Crowe, Isaac M. Marks, Stewart Agras, and Harold Leitenberg, "Time-limited Desensitization, Implosion, and Shaping for Phobic Patients: A Crossover Study," *Behavior Research and Therapy*, No. 10 (1972), pp. 319–328.

⁹Glaser and Biglan, pp. 98–99.

¹⁰Richard M. McFall and Craig T. Twentyman, "Four Experiments on the Relative Contributions of Rehearsal, Modeling and Coaching to Assertion Training," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, No. 81 (1973), pp. 199–218;

Richard M. McFall and Diane B. Lillesand, "Behavior Rehearsal with Modeling and Coaching in Assertion Training," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 77, No. 3 (1971), pp. 313–323; Craig T. Twentyman and Richard M. McFall, "Behavioral Training of Social Skills in Shy Males," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, No. 43 (1975), pp. 384–395.

¹¹R. R. Allen and Kenneth L. Brown, *Developing Communication Competence in Children*, (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Company, 1976), pp. 248–250.
