

MIRRORING COMMUNICATION



MAIN FEATURES

Reinforced skills (TASC Cluster)	LEAD, SUPPORT
Suitable for	Teachers, Students
Difficulty level	Low
Setting	Group
Minimum number of participants	2
Average time length	60 minutes
Special material	No
Online version	Yes

1. DESCRIPTION

The exercise consists of a dialogue between two or more people (teachers and students) with different roles: at least one listening and at least one sharing their negative feelings about the events of the last week in class.

Through the use of a series of "mirroring" techniques, the goal of the exercise is to stimulate an empathic relationship between the participants, to support the emergence of a solution-focused process.

As known, empathy is the ability to put oneself in another's place, to see the world as one sees it (Rogers and Kinget, 1965).

In this definition, the adverb "as" has great importance. In fact, empathy is distinguished from other forms of relationship with the other, such as sympathy or identification, because the empathic person seeks for a moment to set aside one's judgement based on one's system of values and world-reading to grasp the other's reference system. In doing so, the person does not become the other (identification), nor does he/she feel the emotions that the other feels (sympathy), but remains separate from this.

Among the main strategies, we propose paraphrasing and summarising in this exercise.

2. AIM / BENEFITS

The exercise aims to train empathy skills, stressing the importance of adopting an empathic perspective, preferably only when participants believe they are in a condition of sufficient serenity to keep in contact with other people (a condition that allows the participants to shift from themselves to the others). The exercise can be useful in empowering teachers' and students' empathic communication, working on a series of linguistic strategies to connect with the point of view, ideas, and thoughts of people involved, and finally finding a common understanding.

3. COMPETENCIES CLUSTER(s) related

CLUSTER NR 2 LEAD, and NR 4 SUPPORT

Why

The exercise is mainly focused on support and leadership dynamics, considering the TASC framework.

1. Considering support, empathic listening can be an element facilitating effective classroom communication and, therefore, a strengthening of shared and widespread leadership between teachers and students.
2. On the other hand, the dynamic of listening makes us understand the importance of the various roles that leadership can take, not only for those who "lead" but also for those who "follow". We can listen in different ways: paying attention to what the other is telling us or listening passively and, in the meantime, thinking about something else. Active listening is part of the first modality (paying attention). It refers to a situation in which the listener is present in the relationship. Still, his posture, nods of the head, gaze (the so-called non-verbal) and his interventions show concretely and visibly his interest in the point of view of the other, trying to suspend his judgement as much as he can.

4. HOW TO DO THE EXERCISE

Step 1 / Preparation

Find at least one other colleague to carry out the exercise with, and settle down in a quiet place at the school (or, if it is not possible to use the spaces of the school, you can carry out the exercise via videoconference, see the final sections of this document).

The very first step is to assign the roles: the help seeker and the mirror.

Before starting, the help seeker thinks about the things that went "wrong" in the last week at school, in relationships with your students, or relationships with your colleagues. The mirror shouldn't do the same, trying to adopt a more positive attitude. It is essential to try first with a colleague of yours because mirroring, in the preparation phase, works best among "peers".

The help seeker identifies three events/topics to share.

He/she can write them down on a sheet of paper, describe them in short sentences and prepare to read or repeat them to the mirror.

Step 2 Applying the first strategy/paraphrase

Try the first strategy is the paraphrase, which consists in repeating in part, but in your own words, what the other person said. Follow an example like this:

- Teacher A (help seeker): "I can't work with a student (Giorgio); every time I try to point out an error during the maths exercises we do in class, he doesn't listen to me and always finds an excuse not to admit the mistake, or to conceal a lack of commitment".

- Teacher B (mirror): "Correct if I am wrong: You find it hard to work with Giorgio because he doesn't seem to understand your teachings, and this frustrates you. Does it make sense to you?"

As can be seen from this example, teacher B (the mirror) takes the point of view of teacher A (help seeker), trying to "wear the same clothes" from the communication point of view, making explicit his/her disappointment without adding or removing anything. Paraphrasing, therefore, means repeating in one's own words what one has understood of the other's affirmation, thus maintaining attention on the interlocutor's point of view, capturing his feelings and thoughts.

Step 3 / Applying the second strategy/summary

The second strategy to practice is summarising.

Since it is a bit more complex, we suggest you test it after paraphrasing.

While paraphrasing has the advantage of accompanying the interlocutor step after step, the summary is a form of active listening in which different concepts are proposed to the interlocutor within a prolonged interaction.

In this case, the listener picks up the key points of the conversation and submits them to the speaker, thus demonstrating that he understands what was said. Follow an example like this:

- Teacher A (help seeker): "The situation is somewhat complicated. A group of students still does not respond to my requests for classroom activities. They confront me with silence or with ironic jokes that only they understand. They never got beyond the jokes, but I have the feeling that they are planning something else. I tried to organise cooperative activities to mix them with other students in the classroom, but it didn't help much. It seems to me that I am always distant from them, that I am not involved, and that they do not understand me. I do not know what to do!"
- Teacher B (mirror): "I understand that your attempts to build a collaborative culture with your most recalcitrant students are not having an effect, even in terms of proximity to them. But let me ask you a couple of things to help you to summarise what you said: What do you think is/are the main topic(s) of your narration so far? What do you think is the common thread connecting all the things you said in your story? If you could find a title explaining the story you told me so far, what title could it be?"

Even if it is a brief exchange, it can be seen that B is helping A to try to grasp some key points that A has expressed in picturing the situation, concentrating on what has been said, and also learning the situation that B has at this moment.

Step 4 / Conclusion

Test the two strategies with five sentences, and let the mirror practice with the strategies.

Paraphrasing and summary can be considered the two important techniques of empathic communication.

However, it is essential to underline that to make both effective, the listener should try to suspend judgement as much as he can, apply curiosity and respect towards the other's narrative.

5. DEBRIEF

Help seeker and mirror need to reflect on what they have done in testing these strategies. A sort of common conversation needs to be done at the end of the exercises or just after a couple of days. Try to focus the conversation on the following points:

- What did the help seeker like about the mirror's attitude towards him? What did he dislike, instead?
- What are the ideas/thoughts/feelings/emotions the help seeker has while thinking about the mirror's attitude towards him?
- What ideas/thoughts/feelings/emotions did the mirror have while trying to act empathically towards the help seeker?
- What does the mirror think worked well in applying the empathic attitude towards the help seeker?
- What were the main difficulties during the interaction between help seekers and the mirror?
- How could this strategy be applied to students?

6. SPECIAL MATERIALS

There is no need for special materials. Use just a piece of paper to let the help seeker write down the five sentences.

7. TIPS AND TRICKS

Considering that the role of the Mirror can be a bit challenging, especially if the person is just starting out in teaching, if the teacher who is asked to do the Mirror is a little stressed, it might be an idea not to let him do this part.

It is preferable for the listener (mirror) to avoid choosing this role when experiencing more stressful periods in teaching activities, just to be able to approach the other (help seeker) without confusing his point of view with that of others.

If the help seeker's story seems too demanding, ask him/her for a short break, drink some water, breathe and resume listening.

If you can't understand what the help seeker is saying, don't bother asking and saying you don't understand. Try to avoid giving advice and suggestions as much as possible. Make an effort to listen and apply the two strategies.



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8. ON-LINE VERSION

It is possible to set up an online version using today's available video conferencing tools, such as Google Meet, Zoom, etc. The preparatory activity is the same and the steps to follow.

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY - SITOGRAPHY

[1] Kraybill, K. (2003). Creating and Maintaining A Healthy Work Environment A Resource Guide for Staff Retreats. Available online at
<https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ResourceGuideforStaffRetreats.pdf>