

Perception Checking (in) Action: Performing and Reflecting on Gendered Communication with Stories in Business & Professional Communication

Abstract

In this activity, students critically examine and reflect on mundane interactional moments and the identities, relationships, and structures (re)produced with/through communication within the workplace, focusing on gender stereotypes and perception checking. Thinking from and accounting for one's positionality, learners engage with interpersonal communication theories related to perception checking and gendered communication within the context of the workplace as "map-making" instead of as "map-reading" (Nastasia & Rakow, 2010). We find that this activity encourages students to reflectively examine their own identities, scripts, stereotypes, and constructs in relation to cultural norms and ideologies of gender. Furthermore, the activity engages us all in an active process of perception checking that can be utilized in various areas of life, such as the workplace.

Keywords: interpersonal communication within the workplace, gendered communication and positionality, perception checking

Introduction and Theoretical Frameworks/Traditions

Traditional approaches to teaching about gender in the workplace within organizational and business communication run a risk between being overly theoretical/abstract (in content presentation) and being overly trivial and/or reinforcing dominant interpersonal tropes and narratives (e.g., through the uncritical use of examples¹) (Wood, 2002; Miller, 2010; Nastasia & Rakow, 2010; Allen, 2011; Triana, 2017).

This may lead learners to overlooking and/or discounting the role of interpersonal communication within the workplace in how we navigate and construct our social worlds, identities, and business relationships (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Mumby, 2011; Triana, 2017).

Working against such a possibility, the two-island activity, which we present in this session, focuses on engaging learners in a process of reflexivity and perception checking that they may extend to business and professional context and to examining taken-for granted influences on interpersonal interactions in the workplace. The activity does not offer checklist answers but teaches a communication process of analyzing and responding to complex situations within business and professional communication. Students “explore complexities of social connections, social issues, and communication, and... engage in critical thinking about their moral choices and responsibilities as community members” (Britt, 2012, p. 81).

Two Island Activity Learning Objectives

1. Outline cultural influences on the process of perception, particularly with regards to scripts, stereotypes, and personal constructs that guide organizing of information/stimuli.
2. Identify examples of nonverbal communication within the workplace as an embodied relational performance.

¹ For a recent critique on reinforcing a binary model of gender, for example, see LeMaster and Johnson (2018).

3. Compare personal, embodied experiences of gender to others' perceptions and to cultural norms within business and professional communication.
4. Report on own and others' expectations of gendered speech communities within the workplace.
5. Summarize and critique two-culture theories of gender communication

Exercise Overview, Format, and Audience

- **Time** – 30-minutes
- **Audience** – undergraduate or graduate students in business communication and diversity management courses
- **Format:** Case Activity and Discussion
- **Activity Description** –For this activity, we use a story prompt titled “Two Islands” (Hackford-Peer & Flores Carmona, personal communication, November 2013; See Appendix 1). In preparation for the activity, students should understand what perception and perception checking are. We begin the activity with a review of the following terms.
 - **Perception** is the process by which we become aware of our surroundings and interpret meaning.
 - **Perception checking** is important for effective interactions, and we do so by asking questions and seeking out alternative viewpoints. Our perception, which is based on our experiences, what we think, and our emotional state, inherently become our reality – meaning that our perception, or our interpretation of a situation, affects how we approach organizational relationships.
 - We will also invite participants to write about their initial assumptions regarding gender roles and gender stereotypes in the workplace: What are your thoughts or what do you

know about gender roles and gender stereotypes within the workplace? The question can be offered as an initial prompt as participants come into the classroom.

Directions (for completing the activity): Before beginning the activity, we will have participants read the “Two Islands” story prompt (See Appendix 1). Note that no gender(ed) pronouns are used anywhere in the story – just names that are not easily connected to any one gender identity. The key to working with this activity is to not draw participants’ attention to the lack of gender(ed) identifications in the story. When participants discuss their choices (see steps 6 and 7 below), they do, however, use gender(ed) pronouns. Record these (assumed) connections on the board and then engage students in debriefing their language choices.

Step-by-step instructions for the activity:

1. Read the following directions out loud to students:
 - a. *Listen closely – I will read a story once and ask for a volunteer to read it a second time.*
 - b. *As you listen, please consider whose actions were the worst? Whose actions were the best? Why do you think this?*
 - c. *Rank the characters in the story (Nin, Zug, Yak, and Goo) from 1 = best to 4 = worst.*
2. Read the “Two Islands” story prompt out loud.
3. Allow participants 2-3 minutes to consider and reflect on their initial reaction to the story.
4. Read the “Two Islands” story prompt a second time out loud.
5. Allow participants 2 minutes to rank the characters in the story per the instructions.
6. Participants will next discuss their rankings with a partner. The instructor should visit with students and listen carefully to the language they use (specifically pronouns).

7. The instructor facilitates a large-group conversation about how the characters should be ranked. The instructor should stimulate participant interactions – e.g., you can rephrase a participant’s argument and ask, “How would you convince someone else in the class that your ranking is more ethically sound?”
8. While this large group conversation is going on, the instructor should pay attention to the language and assumed connections students are making. For example, some assumptions that are frequently articulated include:
 - a. Nin is usually referred to as “she,” while all the other characters are “he”
 - b. Nin cries → she; the other characters fight or manipulate into (presumed) sexual favors → he
 - c. “Spend the night” = sexual encounter
9. After at least 5 minutes of large-group conversation (or upon saturation), the instructor should interrupt and draw participants’ attention to the language they used. Note that the activity was never about finding the correct ranking, but about engaging into steps of the perception process and assessing how culture plays a role in our communication performances and interpretations.
10. The activity concludes with a debriefing conversation and individual reflections connecting to perception checking in the workplace, as described in the “Concluding Thoughts” section below.

Materials Needed

1. Recommended readings – (selections from) Alvesson and Deetz (2000), Wood (2002), Miller (2010), Mumby (2011) and LeMaster and Johnson (2018)
2. “Two Islands” story prompt (See Appendix 1)

3. White board and markers/chalk board and chalk for instructor

Concluding Thoughts: Drawing attention to the language used in justifying ranking choices leads to a discussion on gender(ed) stereotypes and scripts, the communication of cultural norms and normativity, and the consequences of this. Debriefing questions for this last portion of the activity will include:

- How does the Two Islands highlight assumptions we make about gender and gender communication? Specifically, think of “pairing” communicative acts with gender(ed) performances and interpretations in the workplace.
- How might your cultural background influence the assumptions you make about others, particularly those who have a different cultural background than yours? What language is used in your assumptions, and what does the language you use imply?
- How might your cultural background and the identified values or behaviors influence how you perceive, interact with, and build relationships with others (or not build relationships with), particularly those who have a different cultural background than yours? How might your cultural background/values influence how you perceive others in the workplace?

After the large group conversation, we conclude the activity and session with a 5-minute anonymous reflection (activity typically happens at the end of class). Questions/prompts for the reflection should center on students’ learning and affective experience of the activity. For example: *What in your experience with this activity surprised you? Were there any assumptions and/or responses of other people in the class that surprised you? What are your thoughts about gender and/as communication after completing this activity?* This reflection can, in turn, be connected to the initial prompt from the beginning of the session, allowing participants to “track”

their own responses and learning. As an extended exercise, the instructor and participants may want to pair this activity with the Harvard Implicit Association test for further discussion and elaboration of the activity finds for self-development. As we may have limited time toward the end of this session, we will discuss what the Implicit Association test is and how it has been utilized the reinforce and extend the learnings from this activity. We will also extend this discussion by explaining how perception checking may also require the need to move beyond perception checking toward the acknowledgement of bias in order to seek active resolution. Specifically, we will examine how Gino and Coffman's (2021) work may extend the above.

Application to Conference Theme and Unique Contribution to MOBTS

This activity and sessions connect to the conference theme of DEI by allowing participants to reflectively examine their own identities, scripts, stereotypes, and constructs in relation to cultural norms and ideologies of gender. Furthermore, it engages us all in an active process of perception checking that can be utilized in various areas of life outside of the classroom, such as within the workplace.

Acknowledgements of First-Time Submission of This Work

This is the first time this proposal has been presented to MOBTC and at a conference.

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Appendix 1: Story Prompts

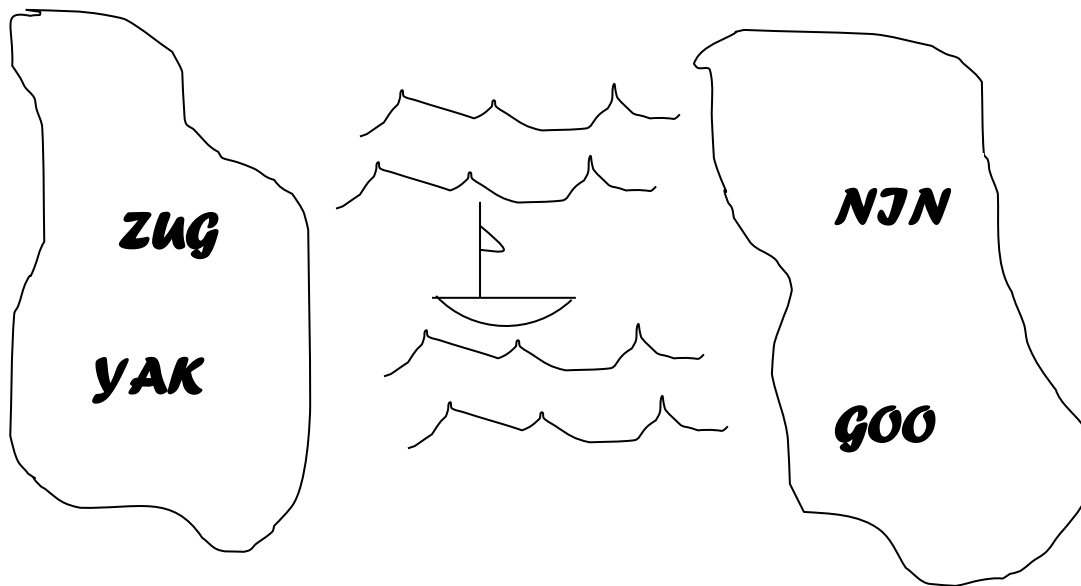
Two Islands

There were **two islands** separated by a body of water. There was a **ferry** that traveled between the islands once a week. On one island lived **Nin**, and on the other island lived **Zug**. One week, Nin and Zug met on the ferry and instantly fell in love. Neither of them had any other means of transportation, so they met each other every week on the ferry.

One day, Zug said “This long-distance relationship is just too hard. I can’t handle it. It’s over.” Well, Nin was devastated – got off the boat, sat on the docks and cried. Along came **Goo** who asked what was wrong. Nin recounted the story and Goo said “No problem! I have a boat; I’ll take you across to the other island. But there’s one condition. You have to spend the evening with me.” Nin thought about it and agreed.

The next morning Nin and Goo set off for the other island. But news traveled faster than Goo’s boat and Zug had heard about Nin’s decision before they arrived. Zug was waiting on the shore when the boat arrived. Zug said “Nin, you have been unfaithful. Leave.” Again, Nin was devastated – sat on the shore and cried. Along came **Yak** who asked what was wrong. Nin recounted the entire story, Yak became enraged, stormed off and beat Zug to a pulp.

The End...



*** adapted from **Kim Hackford-Peer and Judith Flores Carmona** ***