

Traditional communication activity adapted for a virtual classroom

Abstract:

This 60-minute activity session aims at demonstrating how instructors can modify a classic face-to-face communication activity, called Hollow Square, in a fun, engaging -- and most importantly -- virtual way. The proposed activity is applicable for both synchronous and asynchronous classrooms and is suitable for undergraduate and graduate courses. I believe that the ideas presented in this session could successfully be used in classes such as Organizational Behavior, HRM, Organizational Theory, Introduction to Management, or any class that teaches communication.

Keywords: Communication, Activity/Exercise, Online classroom

Introduction

Management textbooks have an extensive coverage on the topic of communication. In Organizational Behavior classes, we teach how people behave at individual, group and organizational levels. At each level, we cover different topics, yet the topic of communication appears to play a key role in each of these levels. Despite its heavy presence in the management textbooks, and its critical role, I have noticed students' lack of engagement and understanding of the value of communication when the concept is discussed.

In order to engage students with the material, I looked into the idea of using an experiential activity. Driven by Kolb's Experiential Learning theory (Kolb, 1984), a large volume of literature has supported the idea that we learn new skills and develop deeper understanding through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and further experimentation. A communication activity that captures well Kolb's idea that "knowledge results from the combinations of grasping and transforming the experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41), is the Hollow Square exercise. "Hollow Square: A Communications Experiment written by WH Schmidt and A Shedin was published by University Associates in the 1970s in Volume II of their Handbooks" (Hollow square team game, 2002). The objective of the game is to explore the team dynamics as well as the role of communication involved in planning and executing a puzzle task. Specifically, the team is divided into three units – a planner, a "runner", and assembly workers. The planner holds the key to the finished puzzle. They verbally communicate with the runner (a supervisor, in more formal terms) how to build the puzzle, without showing the latter the actual solution. The role of the runner is to convey the process of building the correct puzzle to the assembly crew and transmit questions and answers between the assembly workers and the planner. The assembly crew workers are physically separated from the planner (in a hallway or in a separate

room) and are tasked with properly arranging the 17-piece puzzle, solely based on the runner's instructions. The activity highlights and allows a reflection not only on what enables and hinders communication across hierarchical levels, but also on what feelings and emotions arise along the lines of enabled and hindered communication, what biases could emerge within the team, and how can one communicate more efficiently in the future.

Albeit very effective, one of the most important requirements for the activity, is that it has to be done (or rather it has always been done) in a traditional, in-person way— the planner and the runner have to meet and talk, the runner has to meet the assembly crew, supply them with the 17 puzzle pieces and provide building instructions, followed by back-and-forth face-to-face communication exchanges. Yet, in the year 2020, the world was faced with a pandemic, which forced the virtual reality to become an actual reality. Businesses and academic institutions had to transition to online operation and delivery modes. This mandate to operate virtually, further challenges instructors to rethink and realign traditional, in-person activities for the virtual classroom. With these considerations in mind, I saw the need to transform this classic communication activity into an activity suitable for an online classroom.

I have successfully used the activity in undergraduate and graduate online classrooms in both synchronous (Appendix A) and asynchronous (Appendix B) modalities. I believe that the activity presented in this session could successfully be used in classes such as Organizational Behavior, HRM, Organizational Theory, Introduction to Management, or any class that teaches communication.

Learning Objectives

The virtual communication activity is guided by a few objectives in mind:

Objective 1: To allow students to identify different types of communication.

Objective 2: To allow students to identify issues and communication barriers.

Objective 3: To encourage students to communicate more effectively with others.

Objective 4: To allow students to become effective team members. This objective will also help students realize approaches to working with or managing persons different from themselves.

I also have two Goals in mind for this session:

Goal A: To provide participants with ideas how to accomplish the above student learning objectives in a virtual classroom.

Goal B: To receive feedback as to how the class experience and application could be improved along with addressing questions that participants might have in relation to the presentation.

Exercise Overview

Synchronous Modality (Appendix A).

A week prior to the day, in which the activity will take place, I divide the class into teams of 5-8 people and post on canvas the instructions for the activity (see Appendix A). The day before the activity is to be executed, I send a reminder to the entire class of the upcoming activity and make sure I have a zoom link set up and all students are emailed the proper link.

On the day, on which the activity is run, I start by briefly reminding the goal of the activity. Instructors could choose to lecture prior to engaging students with the activity, however, I found that “going blind”, coupled with the plenary debrief, has a more memorable impact.

The goal of the activity is, as a team, to correctly draw a picture of an object that is verbally described, yet not visually seen. The team members who attempt to draw the image correctly are known as the assembly crew. The assembly crew will be visually connected in a

zoom breakout room. The assembly crew must provide only one drawing as their team's output. The assembly crew must designate a runner, who will be transmitting the 1) drawing instructions from the instructor (aka the planner) back to the assembly crew and 2) questions from the assembly crew to the planner. The runner will be allowed to exit the designated breakout room and join the main session, where the planner (instructor) resides at all times ready to provide drawing instructions and address questions. Upon receiving instructions and/or answers, the runner can rejoin their designated room and instruct their assembly crew.

Teams have up to 30 minutes for this step of the activity. If a team believes they have successfully completed the drawing, they can invite the planner into their breakout room to verify the solution. If the solution is correct, the team is officially declared a winner. If no proper solution is provided by the end of the allotted 30 minutes, the team with the closest solution wins.

In the final step of the activity, the instructor engages the class in a plenary debrief session (see Appendix A for a description of the debrief session).

The activity's running and debriefing take about 60 minutes:

- Students are briefly introduced to the objective of the activity (to correctly replicate an object, based on verbal instruction delivered by the instructor to a member of the team). Each team is placed into their breakout room and a runner is announced: 5 minutes
- Activity begins – assembly crew listens to the runner's instructions, draws, and asks questions: 30 minutes (or less, if a team presents a winning solution prior to the end of the 30-minute timing)
- Instructor closes the activity timeframe and announces a winner (in the main chat): 2 minutes

- Instructor shows to the entire class the object that was described and asks the teams to show their drawings to the class: 3 minutes

- Instructor opens a plenary debrief session: 20 minutes

Asynchronous Modality (Appendix B).

If instructors choose to run the activity in an asynchronous fashion, they could do so by prerecording the drawing instructions and placing the video/audio on the class website. Students are then asked individually, or as a team, to produce a drawing of the object and submit their drawing at a specified time either via email or as part of a discussion board. The instructor could then assign each student a reflection paper to address the debrief questions.

Session Description

After a brief introduction, the bulk of this session will involve engaging participants in a demonstration and discussion of the activity. The session will close with a dialogue regarding participants’ thoughts, reactions, and questions. Conference participants will be encouraged to share their own experiences as well. This dialogue is important for many reasons. Specifically, participants will have the opportunity to leaf through the resources they can use in the classroom and assess the benefits and challenges of using the presented activity in their own classroom.

Session Timeline

My presentation will be in the following format:

Introduction (purpose of session and set up) 10 minutes

Presentation and Session Activities:

Conference participants are introduced to the activity and how it’s run (Goal A) 35 minutes

Dialogue:

Conference participants share their impressions of the activity (Goal B) 5 minutes

Conference participants suggest improvements/alternative use (Goal B) 5 minutes

Participants share their experiences communication activities (Goal B) 5 minutes

Application to Conference theme

The session is to be considered as part of the Conference Theme Track for the presented activity squarely aligns with the theme of “merge the old with the new”.

Unique Contribution

This presentation is unique and novel and has not been presented or considered for publication elsewhere.

References

Hollow square team game. (2002). Retrieved from:

<https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/community/discuss/hollow-square-team-game>

Instruction for conducting hollow squares activity (1985). *A training manual in combating childhood communicable diseases, 1*, module 4, session 20. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nzdl.org/gsd/mod?e=d-00000-00---off-0hdl--00-0----0-10-0---0---0direct-10---4-----0-11--11-en-50---20-about---00-0-1-00-0--4---0-0-11-10-0utfZz-8-00&cl=CL1.17&d=HASH01100bdc8601754fcce12d1.8.6.4>=1>

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as a source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Appendix A: Activity description for synchronous mode

Required Materials:

- *For the instructor* (the planner):
 - activity instructions,
 - zoom link for meeting with the class, and
 - the object to be described (and to be drawn by the assembly crew) – potato peeler, guacamole maker (a tool that has on one end an avocado peeler set-up and on the other – avocado masher), wine bottle opener, or even the original puzzle drawing (Appendix C) are good candidates. The object should be complex and detailed, yet doable to draw.
- *For the student:* zoom link information, pen/pencil/ marker and a sheet of paper

Prior to running the activity, instructors must upload to the class website, or email all students (or both) the **activity instructions:**

In our [next week's] activity, you will work as a team in an attempt to correctly draw an object, based on verbal instructions. Each team will have one runner (a designated member of your team), and an assembly crew (everyone else on the team). My role is that of a planner for all teams. As a planner, I will design a set of instructions for the drawing of an object. These instructions will be communicated to the assembly crew by the runner. Put differently, the planner knows what the object looks like and she instructs the runner how to draw it, without showing them the actual object. The runner then instructs the assembly crew. There might be frequent runs between the assembly crew, the runner, and the planner. No notes, pictures, recording, or written communication will be allowed at any time – just oral descriptions.

The assembly crew will be meeting virtually in a zoom breakout room (link to be emailed/ included here). The designated runner will be allowed to join the main chat room for planner's instructions and rejoin their assembly crew's breakout room for transmitting the information. If the team believes that they have the correct drawing, they can invite the planner to verify their solution. The feedback from the planner will either be "yes, that is correct" or "no, that is incorrect". In the first case, an announcement will be made to the class that a correct drawing has been presented and the class will resume in the main chat for debrief. If the team guesses incorrectly, they can continue with their instructions and drawing.

The team with the correct drawing in the fastest time will be declared as winner. If no team presents the correct solution in 30 minutes, the team with the most correctly drawn object wins the activity.

On the day of the activity presentation,

1. Instructor provides a brief summary of the objective of the activity to the entire class:
"You will work as a team in an attempt to correctly draw an object, based on verbal instructions. The team with the correct drawing in the fastest time will be declared the winner. If no team presents the correct solution in 30 minutes, the team with the most correctly drawn object wins the activity. In a moment, I will invite you to join your team's breakout room. Please, upon joining, designate a runner, who will be transmitting the information on how to draw the object correctly. The runner will be the only person allowed to go to the main chat for my instructions and rejoin their breakout room with information".
2. Instructor creates the breakout rooms for the teams (5-8 students per team).
3. Instructor visits each room and inquiries about the runner. The runner is then invited to exit the breakout room and join the main chat room for further instruction.

4. When all of the runners are ready to receive instruction, the planner (instructor) starts the timer with 30 minutes on the clock. The planner begins the “how to” instructions. Instruction continues when runners are present (if no runners are present in the main chat, instruction stops). Instruction and clarification resume/continue until the time is up or until a correct drawing is provided.

5. The activity ends either at the end of the 30th minute or when a correct drawing is presented (whichever occurs first).

6. The instructor brings the class back into the main chat room.

7. Instructor shows the class the actual object and asks each team to present visually their drawing for all to see.

8. A winner is declared.

Optional: to make the environment more engaging and competitive, the instructor could offer bonus points for the most correct drawing, submitted within the allotted timeframe. Or perhaps an award system (bonus points or titles) could be created for worst-good enough-best drawing.

9. Instructor starts the plenary debrief session:

A. Instructor opens the discussion with the question: *what do you believe makes this activity difficult? What could have helped make it easier to accomplish?* These questions attempt to steer the conversation towards the proper patterns of communication. Depending on the desired level of coverage on the topic, instructors can have a short lecturette or brief mention of the different types of communication patterns – chain, Y, wheel, circle and all-channel (Appendix D).

It is critical to make it clear that the pattern of communication occurring in the team should match the complexity of the task, with more centralized structures (the wheel, the Y) being more appropriate for simple tasks and less centralized structures (all channel, circle) being more appropriate for complex tasks. A point must be made that the teams were forced to use the chain pattern for a very complex task and that is, perhaps, one of the main reasons as to why the task is difficult and hard to accomplish – a wrong pattern is selected for the nature of the task at hand. Students should be asked to suggest a better pattern, based on the complexity of the task (here, all-channel) and to suggest how the communication could be done properly given their selection of pattern.

B. The next questions the instructor should ask are: *What skills do you believe are most critical for the success in this activity? What would have happened if I were to allow communication to go only one way, meaning the instructed party cannot ask questions? How well were assembly crew members oriented to the task? How complete and clear are the instructions? How free does the other party feel to ask clarifying questions? How did we seek -- or did we at all seek -- evidence that instructions were understood or misunderstood? Did we pay attention to the nonverbal reactions to the instructions?* These questions target acknowledging the importance of feedback, articulation, and listening skills as most critical skills in effective communication episodes.

C. The instructor transitions to the next discussion points with: *Can you think of specific barriers to effective communication? Any biases?* Here, instructors target the mention of barriers such as: presence of physical noise, selection of wrong communication channel, allowing poor coordination, adding irrelevant content, creating low density (not enough information), using wrong language and semantics, reaching information overload, and/or reading/talking with

emotions. Biases that might be mentioned include stereotyping, halo, selective perception, confirmation bias, escalation of commitment, and anchoring bias to name a few.

D. With the next question, instructors should target students' ability to synthesize or create knowledge: *What do you think are the issues in organizational settings, if your organization was real?* Potential answers include:

- There is often a miscommunication and lack of understanding along hierarchical lines (between those that have an idea and those that have to bring this idea to life)

- Sometimes, interpersonal conflicts arise, so that people focus on their own issues/burdens, without realizing the struggles or the points of view of other employees/teams/departments

- *What would have happened if I were to add 2 more people in between, through which the information is to be passed before it reaches the assembly crew? What are the real-world implications if this was to be the case?*

- the more parties in the communication process, the higher the potential for distortion; messages must be sent directly to the appropriate receiver!

- runners (supervisors) play key roles in any organization – they often are the link between the top management and the operating teams

E. The plenary debrief should conclude with a question of students' takeaways. Great talking points along the lines of takeaways include:

- Communication is of critical importance within any organization;
- For best results, use different modes (two-way and visual) and different types of communication (verbal, nonverbal, written, oral, and formal);
- Master the three key communication skills: feedback, articulation, and listening;

- When people fail to listen to one another, time and accuracy are lost in subsequent efforts to clarify what each party meant;
- Details are important;
- When instructions are confusing, assembly crew members tend to display irritation toward each other, the planners, and the runners. Thus, there must be a balance between details and clarity of these details;
- Under stress and competition, communication issues may arise; and
- Avoid the barriers to effective communication.

Optional: the instructor could assign a reflection/5-minute paper addressing 1) the most impactful moment/take-away from this activity or 2) how can what we have discussed/learned be used in our future careers?

Appendix B: Activity description for asynchronous mode (no runner)

Required Materials:

- *For the planner* (the instructor):
 - set of instructions,
 - the object to be described (and to be drawn by the assembly crew), and
 - video/audio description of the object to be drawn (without actually showing the object).
- *For the assembly crew* (every student in the class):
 - access to class website where instructions and video/audio description of the object to be drawn will be placed, and
 - pen/pencil/ marker and a sheet of paper.

Prior to running the activity, instructors must **prerecord the drawing instructions** in either video or audio format.

On the estimated start date:

1. Instructor uploads to the class website both the 1) prerecorded video/audio file and

2) activity instructions:

With this activity, you could either work alone or team up with a classmate. Your task is to correctly draw an object, based on my verbal instructions. I will instruct you how to draw the object without actually showing you the said object. The video/audio instructions are placed on the class website [detailed description of the video/audio file location here].

If you, or your team, believe(s) that you have the correct drawing, upload/submit your solution to [me via email/the discussion board]. The drawings must be submitted to later than [date and time]. The person/team with the correct drawing in the fastest time (as indicated by the

submission data) will be declared the winner. If no person/team presents the correct solution, the person/team with the most correctly drawn object wins the activity.

2. At the end of the allotted timeframe, the instructor reviews the submissions and announces the winner.

3. Instructor records a video with the debrief points:

A. Instructor opens the video discussion with the question: *what do you believe makes this activity difficult? What could have helped make it easier to accomplish?* The video talk is then steered towards a discussion of proper communication patterns. Depending on the desired level of coverage on the topic, instructors can have a short lecturette or brief mention of the different types of communication patterns – chain, Y, wheel, circle and all-channel (Appendix D).

It is critical to make it clear that the pattern of communication occurring in the team should match the complexity of the task, with more centralized structures (the wheel, the Y) being more appropriate for simple tasks and less centralized structures (all channel, circle) being more appropriate for complex tasks. A point must be made that the teams were forced to use the chain pattern for a very complex task and that is, perhaps, one of the main reasons as to why the task is difficult and hard to accomplish – a wrong pattern is selected for the nature of the task at hand. Students should be asked think of a better pattern, based on the complexity of the task (here, all-channel) and to think of how the communication could be done properly given their selection of pattern.

B. The next questions the instructor should address in their video debrief are: *What skills do you believe are most critical for the success in this activity? What would have happened if I were to allow communication to go both ways, meaning the instructed party can ask*

questions? How complete and clear were the instructions? How did we seek -- or did we at all seek -- evidence that instructions were understood or misunderstood? Did we pay attention to the nonverbal communication in the instructions? These questions target acknowledging the importance of feedback, articulation, and listening skills as most critical skills in effective communication episodes.

C. The instructor transitions to the next discussion points with: *Can you think of specific barriers to effective communication? Any biases?* Here, instructors should mention barriers such as: presence of physical noise, selection of wrong communication channel, allowing poor coordination, adding irrelevant content, creating low density (not enough information), using wrong language and semantics, reaching information overload, and/or reading/talking with emotions. Biases that might be mentioned include stereotyping, halo, selective perception, confirmation bias, escalation of commitment, and anchoring bias to name a few.

D. Instructors should target students' ability to synthesize or create knowledge with a discussion on: *What do you think are the issues in organizational settings, if your organization was real?* Points to be made in the video debrief include:

- There is often a miscommunication and lack of understanding along hierarchical lines (between those that have an idea and those that have to bring this idea to life)
- Sometimes, interpersonal conflicts arise, so that people focus on their own issues/burdens, without realizing the struggles or the points of view of other employees/teams/departments

• *What would have happened if I were to add 2 more people in between, through which the information is to be passed before it reaches you? What are the real-world implications if this was to be the case?*

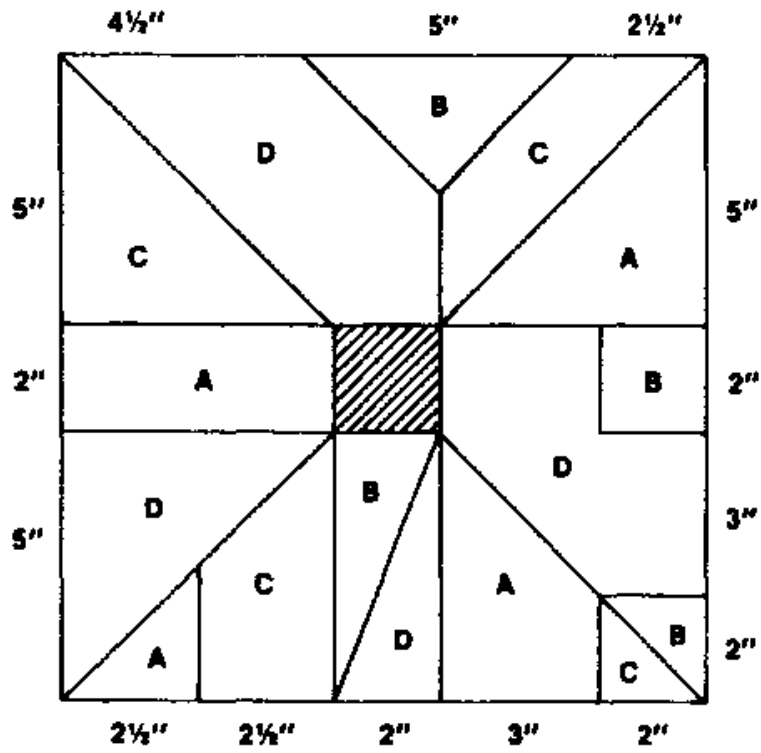
- the more parties in the communication process, the higher the potential for distortion; messages must be sent directly to the appropriate receiver!
- yet supervisors play key roles in any organization – they often are the link between the top management and the operating teams. These are critical people for they have the ability to translate top management’s ideas into action plans and they perhaps represent a must-have entity

E. The video debrief should conclude with a *question of students’ takeaways*. Great talking points along the lines of take-aways include:

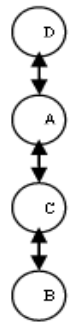
- Communication is of critical importance within any organization;
- For best results, use different modes (two-way and visual) and different types of communication (verbal, nonverbal, written, oral, and formal);
- Master the three key communication skills: feedback, articulation, and listening;
- When people fail to listen to one another, time and accuracy are lost in subsequent efforts to clarify what each party meant;
- Details are important;
- When instructions are confusing, workers tend to display irritation toward each other, the managers, and other entities. Thus, there must be a balance between details and clarity of these details; and
- Avoid the barriers to effective communication.

4. Instructor assigns a reflection/5-minute paper addressing 1) the most impactful moment/take-away from this activity or 2) how can what we have discussed/learned be used in our future careers?

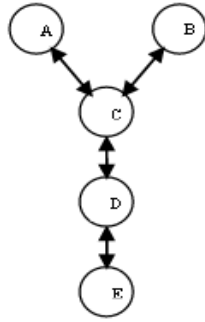
Appendix C: Original Hollow Square puzzle picture



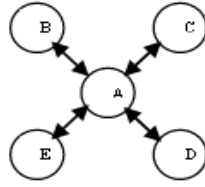
Appendix D: Graphical depiction of different types of communication patterns



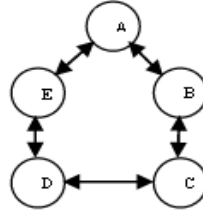
Chain



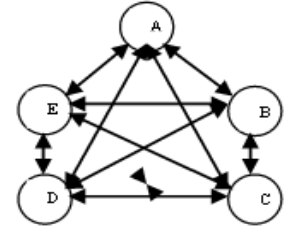
Y



Wheel



Circle



All-Channel