Teaching tips for communication skills

Start by considering which aspect of the following communication skills you want to have as the focus of your teaching and learning. Each of these sets of communication skills takes time to develop and it is not the responsibility of any single educator or unit to impart all these skills. They should all be embedded in every unit to some degree.

Writing skills

It is important to collaborate with the other Unit Coordinators to ensure that one unit isn't held solely responsible for developing the communication skills valued by employers.

‣ Provide exemplars of good writing practice.

Place these in Blackboard prior to semester starting. Examples from previous students can be made anonymous and with permission these can be used to show examples of the writing required. Podcasts can also be uploaded against a power point highlighting good practice examples.

‣ As part of a tutorial/ online provide students with a breakdown of the features of the genre of writing you are expecting.

Provide students with the features of an essay that you expect to see in your unit- tone, vocabulary, tense, structure. What are the features of a report/ chronological essay/ reflection/ exposition? What tense is used most commonly in these texts types? When is passive voice more appropriate than active voice? When is first person acceptable? Add to this over time by providing additional information about structuring paragraphs and sentences.

‣ Model good practice to your students. Consider your use of voice and how you use it effectively to communicate.
‣ Include conventions such as 'report format' or 'correct voice used' in your assessment marking key. If you show that these skills have a value, then students will begin to value the skills also.
‣ Prior to the assessment being submitted have examples of different quality levels of writing with the associated grade.

Ask students to match their writing to a sample that best correlates with theirs. This allows for student self-reflection about their writing. Also, if their belief about their writing is completely misaligned there can be opportunity for feedback that improves future writing.

Grammar, punctuation and spelling
‣ Provide students with links/ resources online that they are able to access, independently of you, to assess and work on their own grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Some good general sites include:
• http://owl.english.purdue.edu/

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/topic-group/spelling

‣ Show students examples of poorly written texts and have them discuss how they would feel if they received this (This can be done online).
‣ Provide students with lists of commonly misspelt words (both associated with the discipline and general word lists). Point out that spell check won't catch all errors. Suggest students read their work out loud or have a partner read their work out loud to them to help them catch any errors.
‣ Demonstrate how the use of an American dictionary in a spell checker can results in mistakes (Trialed – trialled, focused – focussed, center – centre…)
‣ Upon returning assignments, correct common errors both in content and conventions with the group as a whole.

Vocabulary
‣ Provide students with vocabulary related to the discipline, perhaps by compiling a class glossary to which all students contribute as they come across new words or phrases.
‣ Set some time aside to revise new vocabulary and how to use the word correctly.
‣ Require students to maintain a dictionary/glossary of new terms.
‣ Test students on their understanding of vocabulary.
‣ Discuss the role of jargon, clichés, slang, bias, language etc, and the impact these have on how the text is read. Consider what place these have in the workplace.
‣ Teach code-switching. Code switching simply refers to a person's ability to adjust their language choices according to context. (That is, knowing the way we speak to our friends is different from how we speak to our lecturer, which differs again from how we speak to our boss.) Swearing, or not, is an example of being able to code switch.

Sentence level
‣ Teach students what a sentence is and what the different types of sentences are.
‣ Include resources online that highlight how to structure sentences for effect.
‣ Model the editing process- highlight how to rework sentences for best effect.
‣ Provide examples of run on sentences, sentence fragments etc, and how these can be corrected.
‣ Include marks for correct sentence structure.
‣ Avoid the use of etc in a sentence.

Role of Course Coordinator
‣ Map each unit to include an element of communication skill development.
‣ Sequence the skills students are learning across the years in which they undertake the degree by ensuring that unit outcomes are sequential and developmental.
‣ Have an entry or exit level assessment for spelling, grammar and punctuation.
‣ Ensure that unit outcomes include the sequential development of grammar, spelling and punctuation.
‣ Early in the course provide students with the vocabulary to discuss their communication skills. Explain what is meant by tone or grammar. This then allows you to discuss these elements of the students' work with a common understanding.
‣ Ensure that unit outcomes are consistent with the teaching of vocabulary. *Specific industry related vocabulary needs to be explicitly taught to students from the commencement of the degree. Students need to be able to spell and pronounce words associated with the profession and use them with confidence. For example in a first year botany unit*

the lecturer from day one used industry accepted terms like taxonomy, genera, haploid and zygote. As this was a beginning unit she first explained the terms then used them frequently and in many different ways.

‣ Ask Unit Coordinators to include, in the Unit Plan expectations, about certain aspects of communication. These can be course wide expectations to limit misunderstanding between students and staff. You can include:
   • specific instructions on the expected formatting for emails, telephone messages and other types of communication between staff and students;
   • types of communication used in the industry; and
   • information in Assessment guides to highlight aspects of good writing or speaking that you are expecting to see in a student's work.

Oral language skills

Oral communications skills often form the basis of our first impression of others. For our students their ability to clearly communicate in an interview is critical to their success in gaining initial employment, and their ability to clearly communicate with colleagues and customers in meetings, on the phone or in one-on-one interactions will assist their ongoing success. Below are some teaching and assessment strategies that may assist you to develop good oral language skills in your students.

‣ Model good speaking practice. Ask professional representatives to address your class. Students can analyse the speech for elements of good practice to be discussed as a group.
‣ Include information about respectful language and expectations of verbal interaction in the Unit Plan.
‣ Provide some time in class to discuss oral language skills and the importance in the workplace.
‣ Provide students the meta-language of oral language (eg. tone, semantics, pitch, audience, accent etc.)
‣ Highlight the differences between spoken and written language such as level of formality or ways of communicating tone.
‣ Include information sheets about body language for students from other cultures to support better understanding of the unspoken meaning behind body language
‣ Provide unit information in oral form through a podcast/ video. This will allow students to see you (and know your face) and know your voice and will model good spoken practice.
‣ Have tutors upload a short video introducing themselves so students can see them and know their face.
‣ Provide planning tools for creating oral presentations.
‣ Model responses to miscommunication- How to stop a conversation, asking for repetition, paraphrasing to check understanding

Use of voice/body

‣ Upload podcasts and speeches online (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44oel0peahU) and have students watch and discuss elements of tone, speed, volume and body language.
‣ Provide some time in class for students to practice oral presentations.
‣ Discuss the impact culture has on how people position their bodies while talking.
‣ Include these aspects in the marking key.
‣ Have students post a guide to use of voice/ body in their profession.

‣ Have students role play common scenarios from the profession. Other students can watch and provide feedback.

Memorisation/ Content

‣ Provide students with phrases/ expressions that can be used to begin a presentation.
‣ Provide examples of oral presentations that have had elements of content highlighted to show good practice.
‣ Discuss the role of props and the use of signposts to keep the audience.
‣ Model how to emphasise key points when talking

Role of Course Coordinator

‣ Ensure that oral language skills are developed sequentially throughout the course.
‣ Encourage use of IT to help students record and reflect on their oral language skills and to support them in keeping a record of their development.
‣ Develop a course wide approach to accepted standards of communication.

Reading skills

Reading is a critical part of every unit in every course. Students who are unable to read and understand the language of the discipline are at a distinct learning disadvantage. Below are some suggestions for how you might teach and assess reading in your classroom.

‣ Provide a range of different text types and include active participation in reading discussions as an element of the overall grade.
‣ Highlight the different purposes of different text types.
‣ Provide a list of strategies to enable students to determine the text reliability of web pages online prior to the start of semester.
‣ Have some core texts available ahead of time for students to access prior to the unit commencement.
‣ Provide upper limited timelines for how long approximately a reading should take. Suggest to students who take much longer that they find support to increase reading efficiency.
‣ Help students determine how long they can read a more complex text before they begin to tire- provide students with a text and ask them to time. They can then better manage their time, build up their concentration to be able to read for a sustained period, or seek assistance.
‣ Encourage students to know the purpose of reading before they start - skimming for basic information, searching for quotes or searching for evidence, consolidating understanding, clarification of understanding etc.
‣ Encourage students to record information as they read - titles of texts, useful quotes, key theories. This can be done initially through highlighting key details and then through writing details down.
‣ Support a Discussion Board for students to note down any interesting readings they have completed related to the discipline - both fiction and non-fiction. The more students read, the better readers they will become. The tutor only needs to monitor.
‣ Provide a supportive atmosphere that encourages students to want to read.

Comprehension

‣ Provide time in class for students to read and answer questions about texts.
‣ Assign reading and questions for homework to be discussed in class.

- Discuss journal articles and the implications these have for those in the discipline.
- Demonstrate thinking aloud skills. As you read, verbalise your thought processes so students can hear how you comprehend the information.
- Show students how to use graphic organisers to clarify information- what I know, what I need to know etc. (Inspiration, T chart, Y chart, Mindmap, Flow charts, Venn diagrams, Tree diagrams etc)
- Have the students work in groups to create a series of possible questions for the author of a text.
- Ask students to determine whether a text is fact or opinion and discuss the vocabulary used.
- Explicitly teach the means authors use to convince the reader of a viewpoint such as use of experts, omission of detail, choice of words, syllogisms etc. Discuss the impact this has on the author's integrity and position as a respected leader in a field.

Summarising

- Model for students the summarising process.
- Explicitly teach the different purposes of reading that will be required in your unit. This can be done by uploading a document that outlines these purposes and links them to the texts students will be reading.
- Include an annotated bibliography as part of an assessment.
- Have students summarise a text for other students and present to tutorial or post on Discussion Board.

Role of Course Coordinator

- Ensure all units have an element of reading- both explicit teaching and as an assessable point. (E.g student demonstrates comprehension of a wide variety of text types)
- Use information gathered from entrance tests, if they exist, to identify students in need of support.
- Ensure all first year core units have explicit reading instruction embedded within the unit.
- Provide additional support classes for students making insufficient progress in reading.

Listening skills

Good communicators are good listeners. Listening is a skill that can be explicitly taught and practised. Below are some suggestions for how you can develop your students' listening skills so that they learn to listen, not just hear.

- Create opportunities for students to share what they've learned about a new topic with someone else. Get them to focus on really listening to the other person, using the 10 steps for effective listening:
  - Face the speaker and maintain eye contact
  - Be attentive
  - Keep an open mind
  - Try to picture what the speaker is saying
  - Don't interrupt with your point of view
  - Wait for the speaker to pause before asking clarifying questions
  - Ask clarifying questions, not challenging questions – these are for later
  - Try to understand how the speaker is feeling
  - Give signs that you are hearing by giving feedback such as nodding your head
  - Pay attention to what isn't said (use non-verbal cues such as facial expressions)

- ‣ Construct listening activities around authentic tasks relevant to the discipline and future careers of your students.
- ‣ Vary the goal of listening activities so that students learn to consciously focus on what they need to get from listening
  - Main idea comprehension – getting the big picture
  - Detail comprehension
  - Orientation – working out the position of the speaker in relation to a topic
  - Tone and body language

- ‣ Use pre-listening activities to prepare students for what they are going to hear or view
  - Review students' background knowledge and discipline-specific terminology about the topic
  - Clarify cultural information that may assist comprehension of the topic
  - Clearly identify the purpose of the listening – what students need to get out of it
  - Discuss what students will be required to do straight after the listening activity
  - Get students to predict the content of what they are about to hear or view
  - Ask students to listen for unfamiliar words and concepts for later discussion

- ‣ Keep writing to a minimum during listening. If students are to complete a written task after listening, encourage them to read through it before listening.
- ‣ Assist transfer of learning by getting students to draw a picture of what they've heard and compare that picture with others. Discuss.
- ‣ Hold students accountable for listening – or at least don't give them reasons to not listen, like providing detailed slides that already contain everything you're going to say.
- ‣ Model good listening. Pay careful attention to what students say in response to your questions, don't interrupt, and paraphrase what you think they've tried to convey.
- ‣ If you're talking for a while, create opportunities for students to help each other listen by stopping for a 'note check' when students can compare notes with those sitting near them and fill in gaps.
- ‣ After listening, put students in groups to create a list of comprehension questions to ask each other.
- ‣ Encourage students to respond to what they've heard. Ask questions like "Do you agree?" and encourage debate.

Role of Course Coordinator
- ‣ Ensure all units have explicit listening activities, particularly as part of formative assessment.
- ‣ Encourage lecturers to build student awareness of listening skills (articulate the skills).
- ‣ Encourage lecturers to avoid very detailed slides so that students need to actively listen to access detail.