

# 8

## Interacting with Peers and Tutors

Interacting with peers and tutors is a vital part of communication in your university life.

In the classroom context, you will often have to give feedback on the work produced by your peers and you will in turn receive feedback on the work that you produce.

At times, you may disagree with what your peers say or you may have a different viewpoint on a particular issue. At other times, you may need to ask questions to help you gain a better understanding of what your tutors or peers have said. How do you put across your thoughts and ideas in a way that will be well received by your peers?

This chapter will help you to interact effectively and appropriately with your peers and tutors by being aware of certain issues with regard to:

- Feedback
- Questions
- Body language



### 8.1 Feedback

In academic life, people often give feedback on other people's work and receive comments on their own.

#### 8.1.1 Give balanced feedback

When giving feedback on work done by your peers, aim to provide a balanced review which highlights both strengths and areas for improvement.

### 8.1.1.1 Show appreciation for your peer's work

Showing genuine appreciation for someone's work can easily be conveyed by the use of phrases like the following:

*I really like what you have done/how you have...*

*I think it is a great idea to...*

*You have done a good job on...*

### 8.1.1.2 Be tactful and meaningful

When highlighting areas for improvement, ensure that you communicate your ideas in a way that is both tactful and meaningful so that they will be received more positively by your audience. The following are some techniques that you may find helpful:

- Combine criticisms with positive comments, e.g. *Your product sounds really good, but I think its benefits can be put across more persuasively. For example,...*
- Use *seems, sounds* rather or a similar phrase, to tone down the harshness of your criticism, e.g. *Your tone here seems/sounds rather arrogant. Could you...?*
- Use *not + very + positive adjective*, e.g. *The recommendation is not very practical. How about...?* This sounds better than *The recommendation is impractical.*
- Put across your suggestion as a question, e.g. *Might it be better to combine the two paragraphs...?*
- Use *I wonder*, e.g. *I wonder if you would consider changing...I think it would make your conclusions even stronger.*

### 8.1.1.3 Be specific

Be specific and always give examples wherever possible as they help to make your ideas more concrete and easily understood. As for tone, do not dictate. Instead, show respect for your peers and recognise that ultimately they are still in control of their work.

### 8.1.1.4 Express agreement/disagreement appropriately

At times, you may want to express agreement or disagreement with what your peers or tutors have said. Here are some phrases for expressing different levels of agreement:

Complete agreement	↓	<i>You are absolutely right.</i> <i>You have a very good point there...</i> <i>I agree with you on the whole...but I feel that...</i>
Complete disagreement	↓	<i>I am not sure I totally agree with your...</i> <i>I totally disagree with what you have said...</i>

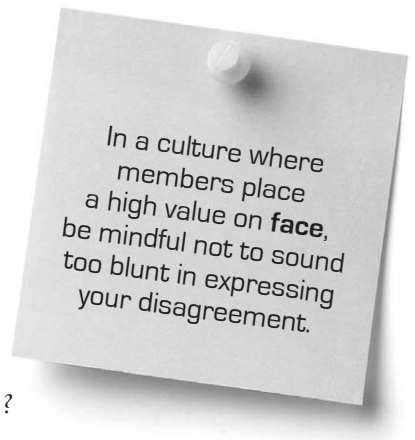
In a culture where members place a high value on *face*, be mindful not to sound too blunt in expressing your disagreement. Therefore, the last phrase above, which signals complete disagreement, must be avoided or changed into a less confrontational alternative.

### 8.1.1.5 Demonstrate understanding of your peers' or tutor's viewpoints

When you want to present a differing viewpoint, it would help if you could first acknowledge your peers' or tutor's viewpoint and demonstrate understanding of their position. Here are some examples:

*I appreciate where you are coming from..but don't you think...?*

*You've presented a convincing case for...However, is it possible to look at it from another perspective...?*



### 8.1.2 Receive feedback openly and objectively

As for receiving feedback, what attitude or mindset do you need to have? Most importantly, you need to keep an open mind, stay objective, and not take criticisms personally.

Focus on the goal of improving your work and learn from the feedback given. At the same time, have confidence in your own work and be discerning in accepting suggestions for improvements as they may not all be valid.

## 8.2 Questions

Asking questions is an important part of learning. You may frequently need to ask your peers or tutors questions and also to answer their questions to you.

### 8.2.1 Ask questions tactfully

There are different types of questions that you can use to elicit different kinds of information:

- Clarifying questions, e.g. *I am not sure I have understood you correctly. Are you saying that...?*
- Probing questions, e.g. *I am intrigued by your...Would you mind explaining to us a bit more how the idea came about?*
- Specific questions, e.g. *How long did it take you to analyse all that data?*
- Hypothetical questions, e.g. *If you were the customer/engineer/IT specialist/architect, what would your major concerns be?*
- Reflective questions, e.g. *I haven't done as well on this assignment as I expected. Is it because I haven't explained the technical aspects of the problem very clearly?*

Your questions should project genuine interest in the subject, a curious mind and a friendly nature. Avoid sounding hostile, pompous, or antagonistic as such a tone is not likely to be well received by your tutors and is likely to intimidate your peers and discontinue the discussion.

### 8.2.2 Give clear, concise and focussed answers to questions

In answering questions, it is crucial that you understand the question fully before you can provide a satisfactory response. To ensure accurate understanding, you can clarify, rephrase or ask for the question to be repeated. Once you know precisely what is being asked, aim to provide answers that are clear, concise and focussed.

At times, you may find your ideas challenged and be asked for a response. How do you handle such situations? Here are a few possible responses:

- Show you understand the questioner's position and then provide further reasons or evidence to support your position, e.g. *I do see your point but we also have to consider...*
- Redirect the question to someone more well-versed in the topic, e.g. *Maybe Professor Wang could enlighten us on...*
- Delay responding to the question, e.g. *That's a very interesting question, but I don't have the answer to this right now. I will have to find out for you and get back to you later.*
- Concede graciously that the point made is valid, if indeed it is, e.g. *That's a very good point. I'll have to remember that next time. Thank you.*

## 8.3 Body Language

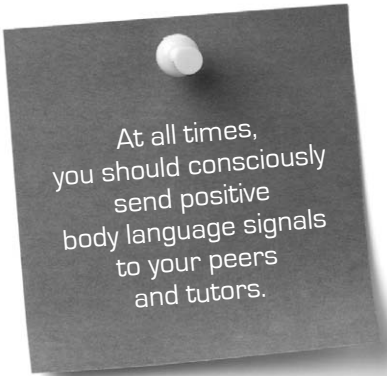
As well as communicating verbally, we all communicate nonverbally all the time. Certain aspects of this nonverbal communication may differ from individual to individual and culture to culture. Generally, do be aware of your own body language but do keep an open mind when interpreting others'.

### 8.3.1 Send positive body language signals

When you interact with peers and tutors, you use more than just words and tone. You also use your body to convey your message. You should use both words and body language in a complementary rather than a contradictory way; for example, you clarify or reinforce your words by using appropriate hand movements.

However, often, you use your body language unconsciously. The signals you send may appear unfriendly and aggressive, causing misunderstanding. This is why at all times, you should consciously send positive body language signals to your peers and tutors.

To raise awareness of your own body language, you should pay attention to facial expressions, head and hand movements and space.



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### **8.3.1.1 Use positive facial expressions**

One way to communicate nonverbally is using your eyes to establish contact. Looking at people when they talk is important as it tells them you are paying attention. In some cultures, it is deemed rude not to maintain eye contact so bear this in mind.

A smile is also a powerful expression that helps people to feel at ease with one another. By smiling when you talk, you encourage others to open up and talk to you.

Frowning or raising your eyebrows suggests disapproval, disagreement or puzzlement. If you frown, people may ask if you have a problem or if you understand what is being discussed. So if you do frown, make a point to clarify your doubt or ask a question.

### **8.3.1.2 Use suitable head and hand movements**

Nodding as people speak suggests that you are following the conversation and are interested. This signal encourages your peers to continue speaking.

Using your hands to emphasise what you mean or reinforce what you say is important, but gesture moderately. Be careful of pointing your fingers; you may appear accusatory or even vulgar. Keeping your arms folded may suggest coldness, defensiveness and unfriendliness.

Touching your peers with your hands by patting them on the head or back may not be appropriate, especially with the opposite sex or people from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Refrain from touching others unless you are familiar with the person and you know the person does not mind it.

### **8.3.1.3 Be careful with personal space**

Everyone has a personal space and if you invade it, you intrude into their comfort zone. Try not to sit or stand too close to a person; find a comfortable distance. If you find someone moving slightly away from you, do not feel insulted. Perhaps, that person's tolerance for close proximity is low.



### 8.3.2 Interpret body language carefully

You need to bear in mind that body language signals should always be interpreted in context and seen as a whole. For example, in a cold tutorial room, a student may fold her arms but is nevertheless friendly, as seen in her facial expressions. The folding of arms most likely indicates that the person feels cold rather than that she is not open or is defensive.

You should also take into account intercultural differences when you converse with peers and tutors from cultures different from yours. Some gestures may be read wrongly, so do make a special effort to find out more about their cultures to learn about what is acceptable and what is not. Asking questions about such issues is a good way not only to learn about other cultures but also to appear sincere in wanting to establish good interpersonal, and in this case, cross-cultural, communication.

- See *Chapter 9: Interacting with friends* for more information about communicating cross-culturally in the university.

## Conclusion

Interacting with peers and tutors can be a meaningful encounter if you bear in mind and put into practice the principles and suggestions given in this chapter. You need appropriate linguistic expressions to convey what you feel and think about someone else's opinions or questions. However, mastering these expressions is not enough; it cannot guarantee you good relations with your peers and tutors. You must have the right attitude towards other people. Respect them, their ideas and their cultures. This is what you need to do if you want others to respect you as well.

### Further reading

- De Janasz, S.C., Dowd, K.O., & Schneider, B.Z. (2009). *Interpersonal skills in organizations* (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Hayes, J. (2002). *Interpersonal skills at work* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Reiman, T. (2007). *The power of body language: How to succeed in every business and social encounter*. New York: Pocket Books.

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