



Managing Difficult Conversations

Competency

The educator demonstrates the skills necessary to effectively participate in difficult conversations with a student teacher and to guide those conversations toward positive outcomes.

Key Method

The cooperating teacher draws on past experiences to assess their strengths in managing challenging conversations. They use effective communication skills, practice unbiased listening, and foster collaborative dialogue to guide discussions toward constructive outcomes. Thoughtful difficult conversations help ensure student teachers learn to teach all students—across race, class, and identity—without harm, and help schools address bias and inequity instead of ignoring it.

Method Components

Introduction

A cooperating teacher who understands their own communication strengths and areas for growth can ground themselves with the skills needed to help facilitate constructive outcomes when challenging conversations arise with student teachers.

Communicating

Difficult conversations can be approached from a variety of angles. When managing difficult conversations with a student teacher, the cooperating teacher should be intentional about their approach. Two common styles are “calling out” and “calling forth/calling in.”

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A **calling-out** approach can feel adversarial and often leads to tension and defensiveness. The **calling-in or calling-forth** approach is more collaborative and motivational. Cooperating teachers should consider using a calling-in technique before engaging in a difficult conversation. Throughout the process, they maintain professionalism and model effective communication.

Listening

When difficult conversations arise, cooperating teachers should stay calm and take time to reflect on the situation. Using empathic understanding—seeking to understand both sides of the issue—helps frame the conversation constructively. Non-biased active listening and awareness of verbal and nonverbal communication are essential, since both can affect the effectiveness of the conversation.

The cooperating teacher prepares to listen to the student teacher's perspective through effective listening skills. These include periodically asking questions to clarify, building the other person's self-esteem by conveying confidence in them, and engaging cooperatively (in a non-disruptive/non-argumentative way).

Effective listening involves:

- Not talking when others are speaking
- Showing you're listening through facial expressions and brief verbal responses (for example, "Mm-hmm")
- Being able to repeat what others have said accurately

Applying these listening skills allows cooperating teachers to work through difficult conversations and support the changes needed.

Collaborative Discussion

While the cooperating teacher facilitates the conversation, both parties should engage in interactive dialogue to explore possible solutions. This approach demonstrates confidence in the student teacher's ideas while honoring the cooperating teacher's expertise. Collaborative solution-finding helps avoid hierarchical, punitive responses that can disproportionately impact student teachers from marginalized communities.

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When a difficult conversation is necessary, structured feedback can support the student teacher's learning. One strategy is the **Situation, Behavior, Impact (SBI) Model**:

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- **Situation:** Describe the context
- **Behavior:** Describe the observable behavior
- **Impact:** Describe the impact of the behavior

Describe the Situation

The situation identifies the full context of the conversation, including the people involved, location, timing, the specific issue or event.

Example 1: “We should discuss the attire you’re wearing at school today.”

Example 2: “Let’s talk about the language you used yesterday during your lesson when referring to undocumented students.”

Observable Behavior

The behavior is an objective account of what occurred. It should describe what happened with clear detail, without assuming reasons or motives. Subjective judgments are assumptions and should be avoided.

Example 1: “You’re wearing a shirt with offensive language printed on the front.”

Example 2: “During your lesson, you said that ‘those people’ do not belong in our country.”

Impact

The impact statement explains how the behavior affects others and the learning environment. The “feedback sandwich” can be helpful when explaining the impact.

Example 1: “Thank you for regularly paying attention to your attire. According to school rules, graphics can’t be offensive. This shirt places you out of compliance with those rules. You’ve been clear about respecting compliance, and I appreciate that.”

Example 2: “I appreciate your willingness to tackle difficult topics through open discussion. However, the language you used and your stance on the topic need closer attention. They could put students—especially those who are undocumented or have undocumented parents—in an awkward and uncomfortable position. I noticed looks of sadness and dismay on some students’ faces as you spoke.”

By constructively addressing these types of situations, you're protecting students from harm rooted in xenophobia or racism, and supporting student teachers in naming and changing biased language.

Collaborative Discussion

Finally, solutions should be collaboratively generated and respected as part of managing difficult conversations. Possible solutions may be explored through questions or direct requests. The approach depends on:

1. The cooperating teacher's understanding of the teacher candidate's learning style
2. The urgency of the situation and how quickly it must be addressed.

Reflection time may be needed to generate solutions for more complex issues. If so, set aside time for brainstorming and schedule a follow-up conversation.

Effective solutions typically include:

- a. A clear action
- b. A timeframe
- c. A referral for further assistance, when needed

Example 1: "Please adjust your attire before students arrive. The counselor may have shirts you can borrow for the day. Here's a copy of the policy in case you need it."

And/or: "How can we fix this situation? How can I help?"

Example 2: "There are effective ways to make discussion a learning experience. Rather than sharing your personal opinion, you can present the information and facilitate a discussion that expects everyone in the classroom to treat each other respectfully."

And/or: "What can we do to ensure that students aren't placed in a position that makes them feel devalued?"

Communication Techniques

Managing difficult conversations requires the cooperating teacher to use a range of communication techniques. The list below isn't exhaustive but highlights actions that can move conversations toward constructive outcomes.

Active listening: Restating what you hear in your own words to check understanding and reinforce the speaker's message. This builds trust and helps you learn from others.

Non-verbal communication: Communicating without words, such as through eye contact, facial expressions, and hand gestures.

Feedback: Providing and receiving information about questions, problems, or performance with the goal of improvement.

Empathy: Attending to and responding to others' needs and feelings as a key part of effective communication.

Verbal communication: Using spoken words effectively, including clarity, conciseness, appropriate tone and volume, open-ended questions, and empathy.

Written communication: Communicating through written or typed messages such as letters, emails, notes, and texts.

Effective communication strengthens relationships, increases understanding, and models positive interactions. Feedback and empathy are especially crucial when conversations involve race, gender, disability, or other identities, so student teachers experience accountability without dehumanization.

Self-Management to Prepare for Conversation

Remaining calm before and after a difficult conversation involves both mental preparation and emotional regulation. First, take a few moments to breathe deeply and ground yourself in the present, noticing any anxiety without letting it control you. Practicing mindfulness—such as focusing on your breath or a calming thought—can reduce the intensity of emotions. Self-management includes reflecting on your own biases and assumptions, especially when the student teacher's background differs from yours (e.g., race, language, age, or culture).

Reframe the situation as an opportunity for resolution and understanding, rather than a confrontation. Prepare the key points you want to address and anticipate possible responses to reduce uncertainty and increase confidence.

Finally, maintain a positive yet realistic mindset. Remind yourself that the goal of the conversation is to help the student teacher make changes that improve their practice and support student growth.

Supporting Rationale and Research

Center for Creative Leadership. (n.d.). Use active listening to coach others. Retrieved from

<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/coaching-others-use-active-listening-skills/>

Chiarelli, Christy C. (2021). Leading Difficult Conversations Series #2: Preparing for the Conversation. University of Florida. IFAS Extension.

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC378?downloadOpen=true>

Ringer, J. (n.d.). We have to talk: A step by step by checklist for difficult conversations. Retrieved from

<https://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficultconversations.php>

Zenger, J. & Folkman, J. (2016). What great listeners actually do. Harvard Business Review.

<https://hbr.org/2016/07/what-great-listeners-actually-do>

Resources

Readings

[Eye of the Needle: A Communication Tool](#)

[The Ladder of Inference-How to Avoid Jumping to Conclusions](#)

[SBI Model for Feedback](#)

[Using Restorative Questioning: Stop Calling People Out](#)

[Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #2](#)

[Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #3](#)

[Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #4](#)

[What Great Listeners Actually Do](#)

Videos

[Brene Brown on Empathy](#)

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[Five Ways to Listen Better](#)

[Try THIS the Next Time You Have an Uncomfortable Conversation | Simon Sinek](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

To earn the microcredential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3, and be proficient for all components in Part 2.

Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

300-500 words

Please use the suggested word count as a guide to answer the following contextual questions. This helps our assessor understand your current context for working on this microcredential.

Please don't include any information that identifies you to reviewers.

Describe a situation in which you had a difficult conversation with another person that did **not** result in a positive outcome. Provide an analysis of the communication that took place and address the following:

- Briefly describe the issue.
- Which parts of the conversation went well? What didn't go well?
- What were you feeling during the conversation? Why?
- What nonverbal communication did you notice from yourself and the other person?
- Did you consider the other person's background, perspective, and experiences during the conversation? Please explain.
- What was the outcome of the conversation?
- How did you feel after the conversation ended? Why?
- How could you have managed the conversation differently?

Passing: Responses address each question. Writing is organized, easy to understand, and includes details directly connected to the issue described. In the final questions, the educator focuses explicitly on their responsibility in managing or mismanaging the conversation.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this microcredential, submit the following **three** artifacts as evidence of your learning.

Please don't include any information that identifies you or your students to reviewers.

Artifact 1: Conversations

Create a list of four possible conversations with a student teacher that would be the most difficult for you to have. Consider intentionally including scenarios tied to race, culture, disability, or class (e.g., addressing biased comments, harmful discipline) and practice conversations that repair harm and support growth. For each conversation:

- Provide a brief rationale for why it would be difficult.
- Identify at least one communication technique that could be helpful (for example, active listening, nonverbal communication, feedback, empathy, verbal communication, or written communication).

Artifact 2: Recordings or Transcripts

Template: [Artifact 2 Recordings or Transcripts](#)

Part 1: Record Conversations

Create two different recordings (audio or video) or written transcripts of mock difficult conversations, each no longer than five minutes, in the context of working with a student teacher. Use the SBI model from the Method Components to guide your conversation.

- Ask a colleague to play the role of a teacher candidate as you conduct conversations based on your list from Artifact 1.
- Inform colleagues that they may choose their temperament, emotional state, and any other personal characteristics. Consider asking a colleague to assume a different background and/or identity different from your own.

Use the template linked above to share links to your recordings/transcripts.

Part 2: Summary of Mock Conversations

(250 word limit per conversation)

For both mock conversations, respond to:

- What was the easiest part of this conversation for you?
- What was the most difficult part of this conversation for you?

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- If you had to have the same conversation again, what would you do differently? Consider factors such as generational, cultural, racial, or other differences.

Use the template linked above to share your summaries.

Artifact 3: Analysis of Artifact 2

After completing Artifact 2, write an analysis of your interactions during each conversation, using the SBI model. For each recording or transcript, please address:

- Did I fully identify the issue? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If not, explain why.
- Was my description of the issue or event objective? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If not, explain why.
- Was I clear about the impact of the issue or event? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If not, explain why.
- Did I ensure that the mock student teacher's perspective was heard through active listening and that they felt supported? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If not, discuss why.
- Did I ensure that solutions were collaboratively generated? If yes, provide evidence and rationale. If not, explain why.

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	Basic	Developing
Artifact 1: Conversations	Four possible conversations that could be difficult with a student teacher are listed with the rationale and possible communication techniques provided for each.	Four possible conversations that could be difficult are listed but reasoning or possible techniques aren't provided.	Less than four possible conversations that could be difficult are listed and reasoning or possible solutions aren't provided.
Artifact 2: Recordings or transcripts	The educator demonstrates effective communication, including listening and collaboration techniques grounded in the SBI model, in two mock difficult conversations, and provides a complete summary for each conversation that responds to all three reflection questions, including consideration of generational, cultural, racial, or other differences	The educator demonstrates communication, listening, and collaboration techniques in the mock conversations, but inconsistently applies the SBI model, and/or the summaries are incomplete or only partially respond to the reflection questions	The mock conversations lack evidence of effective communication, listening, or collaboration techniques, the SBI model isn't used, and/or the summaries are missing or don't respond to the reflection questions
Artifact 3: Analysis of Artifact 2	The analysis includes the following for each conversation: • Identification of the issue • The cooperating teacher identifies their objectivity • Clarity on the impact • Student teacher's perspective honored	The analysis includes three or four of the following for each conversation: • Identification of the issue • The cooperating teacher identifies their objectivity • Clarity on the impact	The analysis includes less than three of the following for one conversation: • Identification of the issue • The cooperating teacher identifies their objectivity • Clarity on the impact

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	• Collaboration evident in the solutions generated Rationale is provided for their response to each of the above.	• Student teacher's perspective honored • Collaboration evident in the solutions generated Rationale isn't provided for their response to each of the above.	• Student teacher's perspective honored • Collaboration evident in the solutions generated Rationale isn't provided for their response to each of the above.
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Part 3 Reflection

Use the word count as a guide to write a personal reflection about your work on this microcredential. For tips on writing a good reflection, review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

Please don't include any information that will identify you to reviewers.

Reflection:

(350-400 words)

Respond to:

- Why is it important to have difficult conversations?
- What's important to consider before engaging in difficult conversations?
- What conditions must be in place for a difficult conversation to have positive outcomes? Consider including psychological safety, attention to power and identity, and a commitment to repairing harm—especially when conversations involve race, class, disability, or immigration status.

Passing: Responses thoughtfully address the impact of the educator's current communication skills and identify additional concepts or strategies that can strengthen communication. Writing is organized and easy to understand.