



Practice Learning Qualifications (Social Services) Communication Resource Development

Discussion of the supervision meeting – Stage 4

(i) Listening

Speaking & listening are deeply interrelated – like steps in a dance – and the non-verbal aspects of communication accompany both sets of steps in the dance. Gerard Egan (1986) coined the term ‘active listening’ to refer to the fact that listening is not just a passive thing – something which just happens. Instead, it is something (like speaking) that we need to pay attention to and work at. He argues that there are four listening skills in communication:

- **listening to the words**
- **listening to the non-verbal cues**
- **listening to the ‘sour notes’**, that is the contradictions that can occur between the message in the words and the message in the non-verbal. For example, if Nazra had said ‘I feel terrible’ but smiled at the same time
- **listening to the wider context** – this refers to having a broader understanding of the situation - for example, Jean was aware that Nazra may have had a different socialisation from herself so she could not assume the same learned behaviour in terms of communication – she had to explore this.

The term ‘active’ implies attending closely, observing consciously and interpreting our observations using knowledge. Jean states at one point ‘I can see you are thinking hard’ – she is observing & interpreting Nazra’s silence, stillness and frown to mean ‘thinking’. Then by stating this aloud, she gave Nazra a chance to confirm or deny this. We cannot ‘know’ someone else’s internal world, but like detectives we search for clues and attach meaning to these clues. However, we can be wrong. Perhaps Jean could have said ‘you are silent, still and frowning, does this mean you are thinking?’ This would have given Nazra more opportunity to respond openly – she might have said ‘no, it’s more that I am confused about what you asked me’. The more differences there are, the more likelihood there is of making mistakes in interpretation.

The four listening skills are not enough on their own for good communication – another key element here is empathy. For Nazra to feel safe in supervision with Jean, she needs to feel Jean understands her. Nazra has had a difficult experience, she’s worried she’s not up to the work or that Jean will think this, and so it is important that Nazra’s feelings are heard by Jean (even when they are not expressed directly by her). Jean has to be able to enter Nazra’s world (through imagination) to feel what it is like in all Nazra’s ‘selves’, to understand what Nazra’s might be feeling and thinking, and to convey this understanding back to her. Shulman (1984) suggests that there are three elements in empathy:

- **reaching for feelings**
- **displaying understanding of the other’s feelings**
- **putting the other’s feelings into words**

Exercise

Look back at the scenario between Jean & Nazra, list specific words and phrases Jean has used which you think conveys empathy for Nazra. Do you think there is evidence that Jean has used Shulman's elements of empathy? How would you have conveyed empathy towards Nazra?

Further Information: Listening Skills

Egan (1986) introduced the idea of 'active listening' to stress that we need to listen to different things – words, non-verbal cues, 'sour notes' and the wide context. He suggests that communication is 8% words, 56% facial cues and 36% other non-verbal cues. But listening is not a straightforward process - there can be a number of difficulties. For example, if Jean had not ensured privacy for supervision and there had been interruptions (phone calls or other workers) this would interfere with the concentration for both individuals. Also if there was outside noise or the room was too hot or too cold – these could cause distractions and impact on the listening capacity of each person.

Lishman (1994) notes that she becomes alert if she starts to find difficulty in listening attentively or feels boredom, as this signals to her that she needs to work out if the difficulty rests with herself or the other person e.g. asking 'what does my boredom mean?'. She suggests that it could signify that the other person has low self-esteem, feelings of not being worthy of attention or depression, or that she is feeling distraction or defensiveness.

Egan (1986) outlines a variety of other blocks to listening:

- inadequate listening
- evaluative listening
- filtered listening
- sympathetic listening

Inadequate listening can be due to illness, overtiredness, or anxiety. In our scenario if Jean was anxious about the impact of Nazra's practice on Paul this could have interfered with her capacity to listen to Nazra and focus on Nazra's learning. If we find the person we are listening to very attractive or unattractive this can interfere with listening too – this can be an issue in practice learning both in mixed gender and same gender situations. Another distraction could have been if Jean realised that she had had a very similar experience to Nazra and she started to think too much about this instead of allowing it to inform, rather than distract from the attention she was giving Nazra. As well as similarity, difference can generate inadequate listening, for example, Jean might have become too focused on Nazra's ethnic minority 'self' and this could have resulted in inadequate attention to other aspects of Nazra e.g. her being a young woman, her lack of experience in working with adults.

Evaluative listening is a complex area in terms of an educator/learner situation because an assessment process is part of the listening experience. However, if Jean found herself thinking Nazra's practice was 'wrong' or 'bad' it would have been difficult for her to engage in a non-judgemental way with Nazra's learning. Conversely, if Jean was keen to focus only on 'affirming' feedback she might have only talked about 'right' or 'good' practice, and this also would not assist Nazra's learning – even if it resulted in both individuals feeling good.

Egan (1986) suggests that 'filters' are the way we pay attention to some, ignore other, information. In a positive way they allow us to classify, generalise and predict, but negatively they led to prejudice and bias. For example, Jean's working class background and gender could mean she viewed Nazra's comfortable background as a privilege and as result felt less empathy for her during the early difficulties of practice learning. Thompson (2003) notes that one the 'myths of language' is a mistaken assumption that, 'certain accents indicate a low level of intelligence'. This dangerous and discriminatory assumption could operate if Jean retains her original accent and Nazra had a negative assumption about Jean's intelligence, and therefore her skill as a practice teacher, as this would impact on Nazra's respect and her openness to learning. On the other hand, 'sympathetic listening' could occur if Jean over identified with Nazra's feelings and moved into a 'rescuing' mode in supervision – in this situation she would have been less able to note the negative impact that Nazra's practice had had on Paul, and so she would not have attended fully to Paul safety and rights to a constructive service.

To understand listening, we also have to know something about this use of silence. Silence is important in direct practice with service users and in supervision situations. In writing about direct practice with service users, Kadushin (1990) notes that inexperience can lead to a tendency to 'feel uncomfortable with silences and to terminate them prematurely'. Within a supervision session, there might be different meanings of silence. Drawing on Kadushin's work, these could be:

- have said enough on this topic
- need time to think (this was Jean's interpretation of Nazra's silence)
- have remembered something and withdrawn
- have shared highly emotional material and need time to reflect and deal with it
- be feeling angry
- be engaging in resistance or self-protection
- not saying something which would be very anxiety-provoking

It is important, then, for the practice teacher/educator within a supervision setting to be aware that emotional processes could be more present in silences than cognitive ones. It is also important that the practice teacher/educator is able to assist the student/learner to understand and make constructive use of silence in direct practice.

Exercise

Take a few minutes to think about what your own feelings about the 'use of silence'. Are you comfortable/experienced in this area? Is it an area you need to develop more for yourself?

(ii) Special communication needs

We now turn to the question of special communication needs. In our scenario, neither Nazra nor Jean had any additional barriers to communicating with each other which needed to be considered. But there are a number of situations which might have changed this. For example,

If English was not the first language of either person

If either Nazra or Jean has a hearing or visual impairment

If either person had learning disabilities (this would, however, be unlikely in this situation)

If either person was a child (not in this scenario)

If either Nazra or Jean has dyslexia (Jean's dyslexia may impact on verbal and written communication, for example, she may need longer to prepare her assessment report on Nazra, and she may need to make use of a proof-reader)

Koprowska (2005) suggests that there are some skills which are worth considering in cases where someone's first language is not English. These include:

- Avoid complex grammar and ambiguous or colloquial terms
- Be imaginative in describing words or concepts that aren't understood
- Draw pictures, use maps, magazines etc
- Check out the person's understanding and ensure that decisions are not arrived at without their full involvement

Similarly, in reviewing the literature, she offers some hints about communicating with someone who is deaf. She reminds us that while deaf people cannot learn to hear, we can all learn to sign. Messages include:

- Respect deafness as a difference, just like gender, sexual orientation etc
- Respect BSL (British Sign Language) as a full and complex language
- Be creative with paper and pens, gesture and drawing
- Be patient
- Allow more time for meetings
- Meet in uncluttered environments with few visual distractions
- Speak more slowly
- Form words more clearly
- Don't turn away or cover your mouth while talking
- If you don't understand, ask
- Use interpreters, especially for critical meetings
- Communicate by letter, FAX or email in preference to phone
- Learn BSL

Finally, Koprowska (2005) offers suggestions on communicating with people who have a visual impairment. These are as follows:

- Ask whether the person sees better in daylight or indoors, at dusk or in the dark
- Sit in the light – facial expressions may be visible
- Use different coloured paper depending on what the person finds easier to read
- Use large print or Braille
- Make use of aural as well as visual clues – so, for example, say 'hello' as well as smiling in greeting
- Watch for non-verbal cues which suggest that the person is wanting to speak, for example, if they lean forward
- Arrange meetings in places which are familiar