

Education for mental health case study

Compassionate Micro Skills of Communication (CMSC)

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Context

Many university courses have an element of group work, and this can lead to a negative experience for some students. Various factors may influence why students might dislike or struggle with group work. However, working within a team is a vital skill many employers expect from their employees. Developing these skills during university can therefore be greatly beneficial for students. Research has suggested that introducing group compassion training into a module can support students and help them develop the compassionate communication skills needed to work effectively within a team (1). Compassion has been linked to prosocial behaviour, selfless concern for other people, and caring behaviour (2). Therefore, introducing students to Compassionate Micro Skills of Communication (CMSC) training within a module has been found to be an effective strategy for supporting group-based assessments. The CMSC aims to equip students with the skills for compassionate group work. During the training programme, students are encouraged to reflect and become more self-aware of their own and other peoples' communication styles.

A first-year Psychology module at the University of Derby embedded the CMSC training into weekly seminars and independent directed activities.

Key module information	
Typical intake	Approx. 150 students
Format	Face to Face
Level of study	First-year undergraduate students
Status	Yes
Credited	Group presentation
Assessment	Lectures (1 hour) and seminars (2 hours)
Delivery	Lecturers/Associate Lecturers
Teaching staff	Weekly (12 weeks)
Duration/ frequency	Weekly afternoon sessions over 11 week in the Autumn term

According to Harvey, Maratos, Montague, Gale, Gilbert, and Clark (2020), this pedagogic approach was found to equip students with the skills necessary to work effectively in group settings. The research found that CMSC training enhanced three key areas:

- + addressing unhelpful group behaviours
- + employing helpful group behaviours
- + enhancing inclusivity. (1)

Development of the module

The CMSC activities in seminar one

The first activity was an ice breaker activity.

Here are two examples of icebreakers in the learning environment:

1 **Getting to know you!**

This ice breaker is a speed dating type activity.

- + In the learning environment get the students to ask each other questions. The questions could be put up on the board and the interactions timed by the tutor. This encourages the students to move quickly around the class and talk to other students in the room.

This activity worked well within the seminars as it was very directive, it created high energy and was very effective in breaking down barriers.

Some example questions:

- + What are you looking forward to on the module?
- + What do you like about being at university?
- + What do you like about your friends?
- + What do your friends like about you?

2 **Or 'Get to know you' Bingo.**

In the learning environment get each student to ask one question from the grid to each student in the room.

- + The aim of this activity is to get the names of the other students in the class to match with the statements in a line of 5 (across, down, or diagonally). The students must move quickly around the room to talk to other students in the class to fill in the bingo boxes.

An example bingo extract				
Has lived in another country	Has a dog	Works in McDonald's	Lives south of the Watford gap presently	Has at least two children
Is a cricket fan	Has a tattoo	Has done a triathlon (any length)	Owns a car	Currently lives within 25 miles of London

The second activity: learning the key concepts of compassion (ie, What is compassion? What is group compassion?)

For example, students understanding what compassion is by using a simple definition by T. Gilbert, 2018: *'noticing distress or disadvantage in themselves or others and doing something about it'* (3).

Furthermore, the students were encouraged to take responsibility for their own self-reflection and self-monitoring of the CMSC group work. This was achieved by the students reflecting upon their group work in the weekly seminars (1).

The third activity: how to use CMSC and within the group work.

The students were asked to start to think about the unhelpful behaviours and helpful behaviours of group work.

- a In small group discussions, the students were asked to think about any unhelpful group behaviours and start to notice any unhelpful behaviours in their group. Such as monopolisers (someone taking over the discussions), lack of contribution/engagement, disrupters (someone not focusing on the group work).
- b Then the students started to think about how these unhelpful behaviours could be addressed compassionately. For example, breaking the eye contact if they were part of an alpha pair (ie, two group members taking over the discussion and only talking to each other), engaging in eye contact with all group members, positive body language, accepting silence, encouraging contribution.
- c The seminar tutor discussed with the students the importance of using everyone's names when working within a group. Research shows that using a person's name helps to encourage everyone to feel included in the group (1).

These behaviours were encouraged in every seminar and the students were asked to reflect upon the helpful and unhelpful behaviours in their groups. For more information, this student-focused research discusses the different helpful and unhelpful behaviours of group work: Gilbert T. Assess compassion in higher education? Why and how would we do that? LINK-University of Hertfordshire. 2016 Jan 8.

Additional information and videos about the different behaviours are available on request, please visit [Compassion in the Classroom website](#).

The fourth activity

Finally, included in seminar one was different coping strategies to help students if they felt under pressure to speak. These strategies supported students that experienced social anxiety or shyness. Additionally, the group was taught to recognise, encourage, and gently ask for contributions. For example, a group members encouraged other members by directing questions to them by name, i.e., "What do you think, Ashley?" If a student was not ready to answer, they were given strategies to enable them to continue to engage in the conversation. For example, "Thank you for asking, I am still thinking about the answer, what do you think, Simon?".

The CMSC activities in seminars 2 -12

Each week within the seminars...

Preventing cliques from forming

- + Each week the students were moved into a new group to prevent cliques from forming. These moving groups helped to encourage inclusion and give them a wider social network (1).

This was achieved by giving every student a playing card that they had to keep and bring with them every week. Then weekly the seminar tutor moved the groups around using the playing cards.

For example, one week the cards could be dividing by the different suits (i.e., students with spades, clubs, hearts, and diamonds cards in separate groups). This can also be achieved by asking the students to write their names on a card. Each week a student shuffles the cards and deals them out in piles of 4-5. This determines the groups for that week. The students found this a fun activity and the tutors observed that there was a lot more discussion in the classroom.

- + Additionally, the ice breaker activity in seminar one further supported the prevention of cliques forming. As the students had briefly spoken to everyone in the class by the end of activity.

Reflecting upon their behaviours

- + Both the helpful and unhelpful group behaviours were revisited throughout the module in the seminars. Additionally, throughout the module in the seminars students were asked to reflect upon which behaviours enhanced their group work.

Further resources

- 1 Theo Gilbert's website [Compassion in Education](#)
- 2 Gibbs, P, Jameson, J and Elwick, A (Eds). Values of the University in a Time of Uncertainty. Springer International Publishing. - Chapter 18 Improving Well-Being in Higher Education: Adopting a Compassionate Approach. 2019; 18
- 3 For more information about coping strategies for public speaking for university students: Tee XT, Joanna TA, Kamarulzaman W. A Systematic Review of Self-Coping Strategies Used by University Students to Cope with Public Speaking Anxiety. English Language Teaching. 2020; 13 (10): 57-73.
- 4 Harvey and Maratos have produced a series of short video clips to be used in future taught sessions which exemplify some of the key elements of compassionate communication. These videos are available upon request, please visit [Compassion in the Classroom: CMT website](#). An example video of the monopoliser in a group can be found [here](#).

References

- 1 Harvey, C, Maratos, F, Montague, J, Gale, M, Gilbert, T, and Clark, K. Embedding Compassionate Micro Skills of Communication in Higher Education: Implementation with Psychology Undergraduates. Psychology of Education Review, 2020; 44 (2), 68-72.
- 2 Gilbert, P. Compassion: Definitions and controversies. Routledge; 21 April 2017.
- 3 Gilbert T. Assess compassion in higher education? Why and how would we do that? University of Hertfordshire. Jan 8 2016. Available at: www.herts.ac.uk/link/volume-2,-issue-1/assess-compassion-in-higher-education-how-and-why-would-we-do-that

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