

# Listening and Interpersonal Skills Review

Therese Shepherd	PhD student Institute of Psychological Sciences University of Leeds
Julia Braham	Learning Area Coordinator, University of Leeds
Carol Elston	Learning Area Project Officer, University of Leeds

## 1 Overview

This paper offers the non-subject specialist an overview of the literature which has influenced the development of listening and interpersonal skills in UK higher education. It refers to articles, seminal texts and writers within the field. In order to provide some context, the first section of the review covers some issues relating to the definition of listening and interpersonal skills and some examples are presented to demonstrate their interdependence. The importance of these skills within occupational and educational domains is also highlighted.

The review then goes on to place listening and interpersonal skills in context by exploring historical perspectives, factors influencing current developments and providing an indication of issues which may affect future development. The paper introduces different approaches to listening and interpersonal skills within some key disciplines and considers the extent to which the teaching and learning of listening and interpersonal skills has been integrated within these discipline. In conclusion we consider emerging themes relating to advances in technology and widening participation, including the cross cultural agenda.

A glance at the definitions section below will reveal the substantial overlap that exists between this topic and some of the other LearnHigher learning areas, most notably those relating to oral communications and group work. Although we acknowledge this overlap at various points during the review, readers interested in a more depth overview should explore the resources available on the LearnHigher website ([www.learnhigher.ac.uk](http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk) last visited 11/6/07)

## 2 Definitions and features of listening and interpersonal skills

### 2.1 Defining listening and interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills can be defined broadly as “those skills which one needs in order to communicate effectively with another person or a group of people” (Rungapadiachy, 1999, p.193). Although there is some variation in the literature over the exact skills that qualify under this heading (Chant, Jenkinson, Randle and Russell, 2002), most authors (e.g. Rungapadiachy, 1999; Hargie and Dickson, 2004; Hargie, 1997; Hayes, 2002) tend to agree on a number of core areas in which competency is essential for effective interpersonal interactions. These include the following:

**Self-awareness:** Self-awareness is considered to be a pre-requisite for the type of “other-awareness” or empathy assumed to underlie effective communication (Hayes, 2002).

**Effective listening:** The ability to listen effectively is a core skill in a range of interpersonal situations (see Bostrom, 1997). Some of the features that underpin effective listening and its role in oral communication are explored in more detail in section 2.2.

**Questioning:** The ability to use questions that maximise the amount of relevant (relative to irrelevant) information that is gathered in an exchange, serves to enhance the communicative efficiency of the interaction (Hayes, 2002).

**Oral communication:** Some of the processes involved in effective oral presentations are explored in section 2.2 below and as noted above, the topic of oral communication is addressed in greater depth by the corresponding LearnHigher learning area.

**Helping or facilitating:** Being effective at helping others is considered (e.g. Hayes, 2002; Rungapadiachy, 1999) an important aspect of interpersonal competence. Ideas about helping behaviour from Humanistic psychology have also had an important influence in terms of generating research and developments in the area of interpersonal skills teaching, an issue which is explored further in section 4.2.

**Reflecting:** Another skill that is closely related to the psychological sciences or counselling more specifically is the ability to reflect or present reflections. Hargie and Dickson (2004, p.148) define reflections as “statements in the interviewer’s own words that encapsulate and re-present the essence of the interviewee’s own words”. Presenting reflections during interactions can serve a similar information gathering function to that seen in questioning.

**Assertiveness:** Being assertive is an important interpersonal skill for interactions in all domains. Asserting oneself can serve many different communicative functions including allowing the expression of views clearly and openly and the avoidance of negative conflicts (see Hargie and Dickson, 2004).

**Non-verbal communications:** A number of communicative activities also involve non-verbal behaviour and an ability to detect and portray messages through this medium is also seen as a central interpersonal skill (Harrigan, Rosenthal and Scherer, 2005). Messages can be communicated through the following non-verbal channels:

1. *Facial expressions:* Ekman’s work in the area of facial expressions (e.g. Ekman, 1992) provides solid evidence that information about an individual’s emotional state can be transmitted via their facial expression. In addition, facial expressions can be used to regulate interactions, for example the synchronisation of conversations (Hayes, 2002).
2. *Gaze:* Emotion information can also be communicated through gaze. For example, long stares are often seen as signals of hostility or aggression. Looking can also be used to initiate and regulate interpersonal interactions and can be used to assess the reactions of others during oral presentations and conversations (Hayes, 2002).
3. *Gestures:* Gestures can be used to replace words, in addition to words to place emphasis on an element of a verbal message, or to regulate or signal the beginning or end of an interaction (Ekman and Friesen, 1969, cited in Hayes, 2002).
4. *Posture:* An individual’s posture can reveal how they feel and their attitude towards others involved in the interaction (Argyle, 1994). Posture also tends to vary as a function of how formal an interpersonal situation is with more relaxed postures indicating less formal situations (Hayes, 2002).
5. *Paralinguistic cues:* Non-verbal vocal cues such as the pitch, tone and speed of speech can also reveal information about emotional states and can be used to regulate interactions. For example, people experiencing anxiety tend to speak very quickly and in a high pitch (Scherer, 1981). Paralinguistic cues can also regulate turn-taking in interactions and pitch changes also indicate when questions have been asked.

## 2.2 The interdependence of listening and interpersonal skills

Although these skills or processes have been presented separately here, it is important to note that in real terms, there are very few situations in which they operate in isolation from each other. The interdependence of these various interpersonal skills is clearly demonstrated by examining in more detail some of the learning situations that students are likely to find themselves in during their higher education.

For example, while describing exercises that had been designed to enhance the development of communication skills in Geography undergraduates, Burkill, Corey and Healy (2000) noted that the

seemingly one-dimensional task of giving an oral presentation actually involves a range of different communication skills (both expressive and receptive) many of which fall within the interpersonal domain. In addition to presenting information orally, students must also engage in active listening and discussions as well as monitoring the reactions of their audience and responding appropriately to input from others. Similar skills also underpin effective lecture presentation by academics (Brown and Manogue, 2001). Non-verbal forms of communication also seen as crucial components of effective presenting and can influence the message conveyed by both academics in formal lectures situations (Brown and Manogue, 2001) and students during presentations (Burkill et al, 2000). In both types of situation, maintaining eye contact with the audience and adopting a posture appropriate for the context in which the talk is being given are qualities which are seen as desirable in speakers.

The interdependent nature of the various interpersonal skills becomes further apparent when the competencies that underpin individual interpersonal processes are considered. For example, many of the skills that researchers have identified as being central to effective listening extend far beyond the simple reception of auditory input. Rost (2002) argued that intentional listening (as opposed to “hearing”) begins only after auditory inputs have been processed by the ear and have reached cortical areas of the brain. Similarly, Anderson and Lynch (1988) suggested that processes of active interpretation are involved in effective listening. The successful listener must extract meaning from the message they have received in order to produce a coherent interpretation of what has been said. In order to achieve this level of understanding, it is assumed (see for example White, 1998; Bostrom, 1997) that listeners must possess a willingness and ability to empathise with the speaker. In order to fully understand the message they must see things from the perspective of the sender which requires them to have a certain level of respect for and interest in others. This notion of empathic understanding is also a central principle of the Humanistic psychology movement that emerged in the 1970s and had a profound influence within the field of interpersonal communications (see section 3.2).

When discussing the components that underlie effective listening, it is difficult to separate out the influence of an individual’s ability to detect and understand additional, non-language elements of the message (e.g. paralinguistic cues) or behavioural messages sent by the sender in the form of non-verbal communications. In face-to-face communicative situations, it is impossible to disentangle the verbal from the non-verbal influences on an individual’s comprehension of a message and for this reason, some authors have suggested that definitions of listening be broadened to encompass the receipt of behavioural messages in addition to auditory messages (see for example Feyten, 1991; Bostrom, 1997). Again then this discussion should reinforce the overlapping and inter-related nature of various core interpersonal and listening skills.

Given the clear relationships between these different interpersonal skills, it is not surprising to note that an individual’s level of competence in a specific skill area can exert an influence on how effectively they perform other interpersonal tasks. For example, remaining with the topics of oral communication and effective listening, Anderson and Lynch (1988) described research conducted by their team (Anderson, Brown and Yule, 1984), in which they found that the ability of learners to convey an oral message to others was dependent on how much previous experience they had had of *listening* to a similar type of message. This performance overlap further cements the idea that core interpersonal skills operate together and develop in an interactive fashion.

### **3 Why are listening and interpersonal skills important?**

#### **3.1 Listening and interpersonal skills enhance employability**

As the UK government’s employability agenda has gained momentum over the last 10 years or so, the issue of identifying which skills are valued most highly in the modern workplace has become increasingly important (see for example Harvey, 2003; Burkill et al 2000). In attempting to address this question, Hargie (1997) argued that competence in the majority of professions relies on the implementation of 3 sets of skills. He termed these “cognitive skills” (the knowledge base of the particular profession), “technical skills” (ability to use any specialised equipment etc necessary) and “social or communication skills” (including an individual’s ability to perform well in interpersonal settings). More recently, Harvey (2003) made a similar suggestion on the basis of his review of the literature and concluded that there seems to be a general

consensus amongst UK employers that, irrespective of the specific degree courses they have followed, a core set of “interactive” (interpersonal and communication) skills should be evidenced by their graduate employees.

A number of other findings that have resulted from enquiries relating to what employees want from graduates have also suggested that interpersonal skills, including listening are highly valued. For example, Maes, Weldy and Icengole (1997) developed a questionnaire measure that would allow employers to indicate which criteria they felt were most important when evaluating graduate recruits. They distributed the measure to 500 managers of American companies from a wide range of occupational sectors and found that oral communication was consistently identified as the most important competency sought by employers. Breaking this down further, the second study reported by these authors suggested that within the domain of oral communication, these managers considered the skills of listening, following instructions and conversational skills to be the most important and most frequently used within their businesses. Clearly then, elements that fall under the umbrella of interpersonal and listening skills are found to be highly desirable by employers.

The influence of an individual’s level of competency when it comes to listening and interpersonal skills has also been shown to extend well beyond the recruitment stage of employment. For example, Zorn and Violanti (1996) sampled across three different companies and found that employees with better communication related abilities also had higher level jobs, had displayed greater upward mobility within the company, and earned higher salaries (in both absolute terms and also when age was taken into account). When discussing the ingredients necessary for career success in the information technology sector, Stevens (2005) also identified the ability to communicate effectively as being the most important competency. This was despite acknowledgement of the fact that great emphasis is placed on technological skill within this sector.

Based on this evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that the development of good listening and interpersonal skills during higher education should enhance employability amongst graduates across disciplines. The government agenda which evolved from the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) requires universities to address these skills and competencies (see Section 4)

### **3.2 Listening and interpersonal skills are fundamental to effective learning**

It is also important to note that listening and interpersonal skills are fundamental to the process of learning itself (e.g. Burkill et al, 2000). For this reason, long before considerations relating to employability become salient, interpersonal and listening skills will play a vital role in an individual’s education ;many of the learning situations that higher education students are exposed to rely heavily on these types of skill.

Formal lectures remain the most common method of teaching and as such comprise a substantial part of the university learning experience (Brown and Manogue, 2001). In order for students to learn successfully in a lecture situation, many of the skills associated with effective listening that have been reviewed above are required. In addition, the growing emphasis on student-focussed teaching methods in higher education has meant that the development of interpersonal and listening skills has become even more central to the university learning experience. De La Harpe, Radloff and Wyber (2000) noted that learning situations that involve discussions or group work, or require students to reflect on their own learning serve to enhance skills relating to oral communication, listening and self-awareness which are important components of interpersonal competence.

This type of overlap between the encouragement of active learning and the development of interpersonal skills is also seen in activities explicitly developed to enhance students’ communication skills. The “fishbowl” discussion exercise described by Smart and Featheringham (2006) requires students to either engage in active discussion about a business-related issue within a group or observe and evaluate their peers doing so. The researchers point out that in addition to encouraging business undergraduates to develop their communication skills (the purpose for which it was originally designed), the exercise also represents a situation in which students are allowed to teach and learn from each other. This type of peer interaction during learning has been associated with the promotion of a deep level of learning and understanding (Anderson, Howe, Soden, Halliday and Low, 2001).

The views of Stammers, Dittmar and Henney (1999) are also consistent with this suggestion as they noted that the introduction of skills teaching in addition to the teaching of academic subject knowledge on their political sciences course at the University of Sussex had enabled a “pedagogy of academic, personal and interpersonal development designed to facilitate deep, active and reflective learning” (p.116).

The evidence reviewed in this section highlights the importance of listening and interpersonal skills in both the occupational and educational domain. Development of these skills should enable students to learn more effectively during their time at university and the integration of skills teaching should also help to encourage a deep level of learning. In addition, this type of training should enhance the employability of students upon graduation.

## **4 Listening and Interpersonal Skills within Higher Education: A historical perspective**

### **4.1 The situation before the Dearing report**

Until the fairly recent publication of the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) and the changes to the curriculum that resulted from it (see section 5:1 for more details), learning related to subject content was dominant, in all but a few vocationally orientated degrees. The same situation was mirrored in employment where, despite the wide-ranging value of developing the interpersonal and listening skills of employees, few professional training schemes addressed this area (Hargie, 1997).

Within the educational domain, some authors (e.g. Hyslop and Tone, 1988; Burkill et al, 2000) have suggested that this lack of emphasis on the development of such skills came from an assumption that they would develop naturally without the need for direct instruction. Interestingly, more recent research has suggested that this attitude is also held by some students. Rees, Sheard & McPherson (2002), found that medical students held both positive and negative attitudes to learning these types of skills. Although they accepted that good listening and interpersonal skills were vital to the success of a medical practitioner, they perceived them to be ‘non-academic’ and ‘common sense’.

Despite this general climate, an emphasis on the importance of listening and interpersonal skills training has been evident in some disciplines long before the publication of the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997). Some examples are explored in the following section.

### **4.2 Disciplines placing historical value on listening and interpersonal skills**

Over the past 60 years the key influences in interpersonal skills literature have come from the *psychological sciences*. The study of psychology is defined as “the scientific study of people, the mind and behaviour” (British Psychological Society website <http://www.bps.org.uk/home-page.cfm> last visited 10/06/07). Its many sub-divisions relate to different vocational areas (e.g. clinical, occupational, education, forensic, counselling) but most are heavily dependent on understanding and researching interpersonal relations and behaviour and the people skills which support this.

Much of the more recent theory underpinning these people orientated professions comes from the early work of Maslow (1943) who introduced many of the principles central to Humanistic psychology. This branch of psychology provided new ideas about human behaviour and awareness of oneself in the context of other people. Carl Rogers (1951, 1959, 1961) went on to develop a non-directive, client centred approach to therapy which built on these principles and encouraged self reflection. Rogerian Therapy helped establish amongst many things, the importance of effective interpersonal skills as these must be employed by counsellors in order to evidence empathy, respect and congruence or honesty with a client.

Such therapy orientated skills are now considered to provide a firm basis for any ‘person centred relationship’ and have been developed by many including Gerard Egan whose skilled helper model provides a framework which can be used to “help people become better at helping themselves in their everyday lives.” (Egan, 2007, p8). Like many techniques originally developed to support professional interactions, the skills

of active listening and effective use of questioning that Egan (2007) emphasises are applicable far beyond the specific context of guidance or counselling and can be applied more widely in personal, occupational and educational domains.

Michael Argyle's work on interpersonal behaviour (1969) and his development of *social skills* training programmes served to raise awareness of the importance of these types of skills across a number of different subject areas. His ideas served as the foundation for many vocational training programmes in guidance, counselling and social work in the 1970's.

**Healthcare studies** (including medicine and nursing) had already acknowledge the importance of effective professional skills training, and continues to encourage new approaches to teaching interviewing and interpersonal skills to the present day (see for example Van Dalen, Bartholomeus, Kerkhofs, Lulofs, Van Thiel, Rethans et al, 2001; Chant et al, 2002). The importance of this issue within the healthcare studies can be evidenced by the large number of hits returned in response to searching for articles relating to this subject on the PubMed database: [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=pubmed&cmd=Display&0itool=abstractplus&dopt=pubmed\\_pubmed&from\\_uid=6700451](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=pubmed&cmd=Display&0itool=abstractplus&dopt=pubmed_pubmed&from_uid=6700451) (last visited 06/06/2007)

Ideas about the significance of effective interpersonal skills were also recognised early on within *business and commercial environments* and throughout the 1960's academic management journals made frequent references to the importance of these attributes when looking for executives (Bryan, 1962). In addition, publications relating to the type of management games that could be used to improve the quality of interpersonal interactions began to appear (e.g. Dill and Doppelt, 1963). The historical development of interest in interpersonal skills within the management sector can also be seen in the work of Buckley, Peach and Weitzel (1989, cited in Maes et al, 1997) who compared the findings of two different studies to find out which attributes employers valued most highly when recruiting management graduates. In the first study (conducted in 1975) employers did not rate either oral or written communication skills in the top 5 important attributes. However, this situation had changed dramatically by 1983 when, in contrast to the 1975 finding, communication was revealed to be the skill most valued by employers.

**In summary**, the literature reviewed in this section reveals that an appreciation of the importance of listening and interpersonal skills, and attempts to integrate training of these skills has been apparent for many years in some key disciplines across both occupational and educational domains. Although many of the ideas discussed in this section stem from historical writings within the context of Humanistic psychology and counselling, their relevance to listening and interpersonal skills training in the present day is clear. Indeed, some recent authors (e.g. Chant et al, 2002) have described counselling skills as a communication "strategy", underpinned by a variety of more specific interpersonal skills.

## 5 Recent curriculum developments relating to listening and interpersonal skills

### 5.1 Background

It is clear from the previous section that listening and interpersonal skills training has been evident for many decades in disciplines where education and training for 'people orientated employment' has encouraged the application of theory into practise. However, as noted in section 3.1, training in these skills has traditionally been neglected by many higher education courses. This situation changed dramatically ten years ago with the publication of the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997). The report and subsequent QAA Subject Benchmark standards (available to view at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp>, last accessed 10/06/07) set out expectations of skill delivery across the entire higher education curriculum.

One implication of these interventions in the higher education curriculum is that designers of teaching and learning programmes are now expected to evidence how degrees produce graduates who can demonstrate *skills* based knowledge and competences. Stammers et al (1999) noted one consequence of the developments brought about by the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) is that:

“attention must be paid to the development of skills not traditionally associated with students’ academic performance – most evidently a range of personal and interpersonal skills” (Stammers et al 1999, p.116)

The remainder of this section of the review will examine the factors that prompted the recommendations laid out in the Dearing report, provide some examples of subject benchmark statements relating to interpersonal skills in a selection of disciplines and finally touch briefly on the impact of personal development planning in the development of students’ interpersonal skills.

## **5.2 Graduate skill deficits: A prompt for increased emphasis on skill development**

The desire to produce graduates with the skills required by employers is seen as the major driving force behind the recommendations in the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) and the curriculum reforms that followed (Burkill et al, 2000). A substantial body of evidence suggests that there is a deficit between the skill levels that employers expect university graduates to possess, and those that are actually displayed. This issue is particularly salient when it comes to listening and interpersonal skills - despite growing indications that these are highly desired by employers (see section 2.1), evidence continues to suggest that employer requirements are not being met. A recent Guardian article (Ford, 2007) featured a report from the Association of Graduate Employers complaining about the lack of graduates with the appropriate combination of academic and “soft” skills.

Given the global nature of today’s workplace, it is also important to note that the deficit between the skills employers want and what they actually find in graduates is not just restricted to the UK but is apparent world-wide (De Le Harpe et al, 2000) - the results of the Stevens (2005) survey of American employers found that they would like to see graduates who were better at oral presentation, and had better listening and interpersonal skills. Harvey (2003) pointed to similar discontent amongst UK employers.

## **5.3 Examples of subject benchmark statements across a variety of disciplines**

A selection of benchmark statements are detailed below demonstrating how listening and interpersonal skills training is being delivered across the curriculum.

### **1) Social Policy and Administration and Social Work**

- Listen actively to others, engage appropriately with the life experiences of service users, understand accurately their viewpoint and overcome personal prejudices to respond appropriately to a range of complex personal and interpersonal situations.
- Use both verbal and non-verbal cues to guide interpretation.

### **2) Theology**

- Evidence empathy and the ability to have respect for others views.

### **3) Information Management**

- Students should be able to interact effectively and impartially with individuals and groups in particular communities.

### **4) Communication and media students should be able to:**

- Communicate effectively in inter-personal settings, in writing and in a variety of media.
- Work productively in a group or team, showing abilities at different times to listen, contribute and lead effectively.

### **5) Business and management degrees emphasise the development of the**

- Interpersonal skills of effective listening, negotiating, persuasion and presentation.



- Self reflection and criticality including self awareness, openness and sensitivity to diversity in terms of people, cultures, business and management issues. Also, the skills of learning to learn and developing a continuing appetite for learning; reflective, adaptive and collaborative learning.

**6) Medical graduates** are expected to be competent in the following areas of communication:

- Listening, to patients, relatives / carers / partners, and other healthcare professionals.
- Explaining, and providing patients and others with adequate information.
- Mediating and negotiating with patients, carers and colleagues.
- 

## **5.4 The impact of personal development planning on skills development**

In addition to skills integration within the curriculum and benchmark standards, personal development planning and progress files have had a significant impact on the development of interpersonal skills within the higher education curriculum. Personal development planning is defined by QAA (2000) as “a structured and supported processes to develop the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their own learning and achievement and to plan for their own personal, educational and career development”. This emphasis on skills encourages students to identify areas for development and look for opportunities to evidence where they have gained skills e.g. taking part in voluntary work, engaging with student societies, standing as student course reps etc.

The link between employability and pdp is well documented. At the University of Leeds, Pauline Kneale has used employer’s performance and review documentation to show how a process which has been developed during academic study is continued in employment/

<http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/performance/pdpindex.html> (last visited 7/6/07)

Further information and resources about personal development planning and its impact on the higher education curriculum is also available through the LearnHigher website

[http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/Personal\\_Development.html](http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/Personal_Development.html) (last visited 7/6/07)

## **6 Teaching and Assessment of Listening & Interpersonal Skills**

The following section outlines a selection of examples of good practice in the integration of teaching and assessment of listening and interpersonal skills across a number of health and business related disciplines. Again the purpose of this section is to provide a flavour of teaching and assessment practices within this area rather than a comprehensive review of all the teaching techniques and assessment opportunities that are available. To place this practice in context, the relevance of listening and interpersonal skills to each of the disciplines covered is also considered.

### **6.1 Medicine**

The importance of listening and interpersonal skills within the medical profession is apparent on a number of levels. For example, Lloyd et al (1991, cited in Greco, Spike, Powell and Brownlea, 2002) found that interpersonal skills were the most important criterion used by those selecting a physician. Similarly, Lang, Floyd and Beine (2000) suggested that good listening skills provide increased satisfaction for both patient and physician, and improved medical management. In addition, Silverman, Kurtz and Draper (1998) argued that effective communication skills were essential to a whole host of activities involved in healthcare from initial stages of taking a patient’s history to provision of information later in the treatment process. The training of undergraduates often parallels this as they are taught to listen to the patient’s ‘story’ at the beginning of a consultation and from this determine the line of questioning leading to diagnosis (Cocksedge and May, 2005). As well as excellent listening skills, medical practitioners also require exemplary interpersonal skills and a good ‘bed-side manner’ (Greco et al 2002).



At the University of Leeds the Medical Education Unit assesses medical interview skills using the Calgary-Cambridge model of gathering patient information and building a relationship (see <http://www.skillscascade.com/handouts/CalgaryCambridgeGuide.pdf>). This model provides an outline of the attributes of an effective interview and covers issues such as building a relationship with the patient and gathering information. Simulated patients are often used to help medical students practise gathering information and taking patient histories. Aspergen's (1999) review of literature relating to communication skills training in medicine suggested that the use of simulated patients was a powerful training tool as students tended to respond to these patients in a similar way that they did to real patients.

## **6.2 Nursing**

The requirement for effective communication is also apparent in the nursing profession. Chant et al (2002) noted the widely held view that patient satisfaction, compliance and recovery can all be enhanced through effective communication with and by nurses. Yet despite this evidence the authors conclude that interpersonal communication skills are still lacking in many areas of nursing practice. Again these researchers suggested that in order to address this problem greater emphasis must continue to be placed on skills training in higher education.

At the University of Leeds, student mental health nurses use video to develop their interpersonal and therapeutic counselling skills. Counselling sessions with simulated patients are conducted using person-centred and psychodynamic therapeutic approaches, with immediate feedback given by the simulated patient, peers and teachers. The video is reviewed and reflected on by the student. Specific skills sessions on self awareness, verbal and non-verbal communication and listening/attending skills are integral to the curriculum.

## **6.3 Dentistry**

The importance of communication skills is also emphasised in the dentistry curriculum. Hannah, Millichamp and Ayers (2004) identified a number of positive outcomes associated with dentists who demonstrate effective communication skills. Amongst others, these benefits included increased patient satisfaction, a reduction in anxiety and better adherence to advice given to them by their dentists.

Interpersonal skills training provided to dentistry students at the University of Leeds also involves the use of simulated patients and video recordings. Patient interview scenarios become increasingly complex over time. At level one, students develop a better understanding of verbal and non-verbal communication and anticipate barriers to effective communication, by level three the focus is on work with more challenging patients and communications within the dental team. Formative assessment occurs by self and peer assessment of videos, feed-back from simulated and actual patients and students keeping reflective logs relating to actual patient encounters.

## **6.4 Business-related degrees**

Listening and interpersonal skills also have an important role in customer focused business environments. A survey by McEwan (1997 cited by Rautalinko and Lisper, 2004) showed that employees spent up to 25% of their total training time on communication skills including listening and reflecting skills training. The study carried out by Rautalinko and Lisper (2004) assessed the effects of reflective listening training in a corporate setting with results demonstrating that training increased reflective listening and that after training these skills were subsequently transferred to an authentic work place setting. Clearly the implication here is that skills training has a positive effect on performance within genuine business environments.

At the University of Portsmouth a generic module on communication skills in the workplace is a named award for a number of degrees including International Trade, Sports Management and Communications Studies (for syllabus details see: [http://www.tech.port.ac.uk/tud/db/UnivPort/level\\_2/ComWork1.htm](http://www.tech.port.ac.uk/tud/db/UnivPort/level_2/ComWork1.htm) - last visited 3/4/07). The module places particular emphasis on interpersonal skills in team situations and consists of a variety of teaching methods including workshops, role plays, simulations and lectures. The stated aims of the module are as follows:

- 1) To sensitise participants to the interpersonal skills needed for effective organisational functioning.
- 2) To enable participants to acquire the language connected to a range of interpersonal skills so that they may communicate more confidently and more effectively in an organisational context.

## **6.5 Language study**

As language teaching has moved toward comprehension-based approaches, listening to learn has become increasingly important in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom (Van Duzer, 1997), and is seen as a core component of many language programmes (Richards, 2005). The central role of listening in this discipline has generated a lot of research into the processes involved in second language listening and comprehension (Field, 1998; 2004). Considerable attention has also been given to the development of techniques and tools to encourage the development of skills in this area (Wilson, 2003; Hulstijn, 2003).

## **6.6 Summary**

The evidence reviewed in this section suggests that sound efforts are being made to integrate both the teaching and assessment of listening and interpersonal skills using a variety of different techniques and across a variety of disciplines. Although there is some evidence available in the literature relating to the effectiveness of these various methods (see above discussion of simulated patients for example), there are calls for a more thorough examination of this issue. Chant et al (2002) recommended that more research be conducted to both evaluate the effectiveness of various skills training methods and to identify which particular elements of the teaching currently available is most useful in terms of improving communication skills in practise.

# **7 Emerging themes: Implications for listening and interpersonal skills**

## **7.1 Online learning**

The facility to learn online is changing the dynamics of interpersonal communication and affecting the way that people teach and learn (DeLacey & Leonard, 2002; Radcliffe, 2002; Starr, 1997 cited by Lee, Cho, Gay, Davidson and Ingraffea, 2003). The online (rather than face to face) learning situation is potentially extremely valuable but also brings with it a host of new challenges for educators.

The idea that social interaction can promote effective learning has been acknowledged by learning theories (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Yang, Tsai, Kim, Cho and Laffey, 2006) and is central to more recent conceptual frameworks (e.g. Wenger 1998 cited in Yang et al, 2006). As the growing pedagogic philosophy for online learning is socio-constructivist in nature with an emphasis on collaboration (Dawson, 2006) its inherently social and interactive nature has implications for skills development. A significant proportion of recent literature within the area of interpersonal communication has concentrated on this issue and findings suggest that successful online collaboration requires a sense of community and productive social interaction with both peers and educators (McInnerney and Roberts, 2004). Computer mediated communication (CMC) through both asynchronous and synchronous communication can minimise isolation and foster online relationships yet the student needs to learn a whole new etiquette (or netiquette) when communicating online.

There is a growing need for information and resources to help students adapt to an online learning environment and develop the interpersonal skills needed to build and maintain secure online communities. Equally educators need help in moving to this learning medium; communicating and supporting students within an online environment involves different skills than communication in a face to face situation.

Technological advancements also have implications for listening and interpersonal skill development beyond the sphere of online learning. An increasing reliance on the use of new technologies in the occupational domain is also changing the nature of communication in the workplace and increasing the role it plays (Stevens, 2005). In order to remain responsive to these changes, it is important that universities provide

students with the training needed to become skilled in the use of emerging technologies. An example from the area of communications is the need to expose students to activities that allow them to become proficient in the use of email in professional settings (Burkill et al, 2000).

## 7.2 Widening participation

The growing diversity of the student population that has resulted from the government's agenda for widening participation in higher education also has implications for skills training. At a general level, Burkill et al (2000) point out that because students entering higher education now differ much more in terms of their communicative abilities, the assumption that all students will already possess the skills necessary for successful learning at university when they enter is no longer valid. Therefore, the need to focus efforts on listening and interpersonal skills development is more apparent now than ever before.

The cultural diversity of the student population is also increasing, and this too has important implications for listening and interpersonal skills training. Cross-cultural variations in terms of communication are extensive and extend far beyond simple language differences. Variations with regard to the meaning of communicative cues have the potential to create misunderstanding or discomfort. For example, individuals who do not come from "close contact" cultures (see Guirdham, 2002) are likely to experience discomfort in interactive situations where close proximity is required (Hayes, 2002). Argyle (1994) also provides details of cross-cultural differences in a number of other non-verbal behaviours relating to communication including gesturing and gaze.

At a more general level, Guirdham (2002) points out that there are also cross cultural differences in the emphasis placed on expressive relative to receptive communication strategies. Eastern cultures tend to focus on skills linked to receiving signals (e.g. listening) while Western cultures tend to be more sender (e.g. speaking) orientated.

Clearly, in order to accommodate the needs of the increasingly diverse student population it is important that listening and interpersonal skills teaching and assessment take into account variations between students in terms of both their abilities and cultural backgrounds.

## 8 Summary

This review provides an introduction to various issues relating to the development of listening and interpersonal skills in higher education. It is clear from the literature presented here that effective interpersonal functioning is supported by a number of different, but inter-related skills. The value placed on these skills by employers and the key role that they play in promoting effective learning demonstrates their importance. Although some disciplines have a history of emphasising listening and interpersonal skills, there are also many disciplines in which they have been relatively neglected until recently.

The literature reviewed here suggests that this situation is now changing and a number of different examples of good practise in the development of these skills were described. It is clear that some disciplines are actively developing students' interpersonal communication skills using role-play, video feedback and other interactive activities. However, one limitation of these initiatives is that many of the learning resources supporting the interactions are specialist in nature using, for example, case studies which relate to specific client groups. Despite this, a lot of positive work is being done in the area of listening and interpersonal skills development. Opportunities to encourage self-development are evident in many educational institutions with learning development centres providing resources and training sessions including interpersonal communication. The Skills Centre at the University of Leeds ([www.skillscentre.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.skillscentre.leeds.ac.uk)) offers web resources and workshops and these will be supplemented by the work of the LearnHigher CETL.

As a result of this study a dedicated website will be developed to link to a bank of qualified information and activity resources. In addition, where there is a need that cannot be met by existing resources, generic, re-usable learning objects will be developed that can be integrated into individual learning programmes.

## 9 References

- Anderson, A. and Lynch, T. (1988). *Listening*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, T. Howe, C. Soden, R. Halliday, J. and Low, J. (2001). Peer interaction and the learning of critical thinking skills in further education students. *International Science*, 29, 1-32.
- Argyle M (1969). Social skills training in education. *Paedagogica Europaea*, 5, 72-79.
- Argyle, M. (1994). *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour (5<sup>th</sup> Edition)*. London: Penguin.
- Aspergen, K. (1999). BEME Guide no. 2: Teaching and learning communication skills in medicine – a review with quality grading of articles. *Medical Teacher*, 21, 563-570.
- Bostrom, R.N. (1997). The process of listening. In O.Hargie (Ed.). *The handbook of communication skills*. London: Routledge
- British Psychological Society website. Available at: website <http://www.bps.org.uk/home-page.cfm> (last accessed 10/06/07).
- Brown, G. and Manogue, M. (2001). AMEE medical education guide no. 22: Refreshing lecturing: a guide for lecturers. *Medical Teacher*, 23, 231-244.
- Bryan, S.E. (1962) The situation and the opportunist executive. *The Journal of the Academy of Management*, 5, 36–56.
- Burkill, S. Corey, D. and Healy, M. (2000). *Improving students' communication skills*. Cheltenham: Geography Discipline Network (GDN).
- Chant, S. Jenkinson, T. Randle, J. and Russell, G. (2002) Communication skills: some problems in nursing education practice. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 11, 12- 21.
- Cockesedge, S. and May, C. (2005). The listening loop: a model of choice about cues within primary care consultations. *Medical Education*, 39, 999-1005.
- Dawson, S. (2006). A study of the relationship between student communication interaction and sense of community. *Internet and Higher Education* 9, 153-162.
- De la Harpe, B., Radloff, A. and Wyber, J. (2000). Quality and generic (professional) skills. *Quality in Higher Education*, 6, 231-243.
- Dill, W.R. and Doppelt, N. (1963). The Acquisition of Experience in a Complex Management Game. *Management Science*, 10, 30-46.
- Egan G. (2007). *The skilled helper (8<sup>th</sup> Edition)*. Belmont USA: Thompson Higher Education.
- Ekman, P. (1992). Facial expressions of emotions: new findings, new questions. *Psychological Science*, 3, 34-38.
- Feyten, C.M. (1991). The power of listening ability: An overlooked dimension in language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 75, 173-180.
- Field, J. (1998). Skills and strategies: towards a new methodology for listening. *ELT Journal*, 52, 110-118.
- Field, J. (2004). An insight into listeners' problems: too much bottom-up or too much top-down? *System*, 32, 363-377.

- Ford, L. (2007). Those little extras. *The Guardian*, Feb 3. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/graduate/story/0,,2004810,00.html> (last accessed 10/06/07).
- Greco, M., Spike, N., Powell, R. and Brownlea, A. (2002) Assessing communication skills of GP registrars: a comparison of patient and GP examiner ratings. *Medical Education*, 36, 366-376.
- Guirdham, M. (2002). *Interactive behaviour at work (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)*. Essex: Pearson education.
- Hannah, A., Millichamp, J., Ayers, M.S. (2004). A communication skills course for undergraduate dental students. *Journal of Dental Education*, 68, 970-977.
- Hargie, O. (Ed.) (1997). *The handbook of communication skills*. London: Routledge.
- Hargie, O. and Dickson, D. (2004). *Skilled interpersonal communication: Research, theory and practice (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)*. Hove: Routledge.
- Harrigan, J.A., Rosenthal, R., and Scherer, K.R. (Eds.) (2005). *The new handbook of methods in nonverbal behaviour research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, L. (2003). *Transitions from higher education to work*. Report from the “perspectives” series of employability briefing papers. UK Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Generic Centre (GC). Available at: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full\\_record&section=generic&id=246](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&section=generic&id=246) (last accessed 06 June 2007).
- Hayes, J. (2002). *Interpersonal skills at work (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Hove: Routledge.
- Hulstijn, J.H. (2003). Connectionist models of language processing and the training of listening skills with the aid of multimedia software. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 16, 413-425.
- Hyslop, N. and Tone, B. (1988). Listening: are we teaching it, and if so, how? ERIC digest number 3. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills Bloomington IN*. Available at: <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-928/listening.htm> (last accessed 10/06/07).
- Kneale, P. (2007). Motivating student personal development planning. Available at <http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/performance/pdpindex.html> (last accessed 07/06/07).
- Lang, F., Floyd, M.R. and Beine, K.L. (2000). Clues to patients’ explanations and concerns about their illnesses. *Archives of Family Medicine*, 9, 222-227.
- Learnhigher (2007). Personal development planning. Available at [http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/Personal\\_Development.html](http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/Personal_Development.html) (last accessed, 07/06/07).
- Lee, J., Cho, H., Gay, G., Davidson, B. and Ingraffea, A. (2003) Technology acceptance and social networking in distance learning. *Educational Technology and Society*, 6, 50-61.
- Maes, J.D., Weldy, T.G. and Icenogle, M.L. (1997). A managerial perspective: Oral communication competency is most important for business students in the workplace. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 34, 67-80.
- Maslow, A.H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396.
- McInnerney, J. and Roberts, T. (2004). Online learning: Social interaction and the creation of a sense of community. *Educational Technology and Society*, 7, 73-81.
- NCICHE (1997). *Higher education in the learning society: Report on the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*. London: HMSO.

PubMed literature search results. Available at [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=pubmed&cmd=Display&itool=abstractplus&dopt=pubmed\\_pubmed&from\\_uid=6700451](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=pubmed&cmd=Display&itool=abstractplus&dopt=pubmed_pubmed&from_uid=6700451) (last accessed 06/06/2007).

Quality Assurance Agency (2000). *Developing a progress file for HE : summary report of the consultation exercise*. Available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/archive/summary/default.asp> (last accessed 10/06/07).

Quality Assurance Agency (2006). *Benchmarking Statements* (online). Available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp> (last accessed 10/06/07).

Rautalinko, E. and Lisper, H. (2004) Effects of Training Reflective Listening in a Corporate Setting. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 18, 281-299.

Rees, C. E., Sheard, C.E. and McPherson, A.C. (2002). A qualitative study to explore undergraduate medical students' attitudes towards communication skills. *Medical Teacher*, 24, 289-293.

Richards, J.C. (2005). Second thoughts on teaching listening. *RELC Journal*, 36, 85-92.

Rogers C.R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: Its current practice, implications and theory*. London: Constable

Rogers C.R. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.). *Psychology: A study of a science. Vol. 3: Formulations of the person and the social context* (pp. 184-256). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rogers C.R.(1961). *On Becoming a Person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Rost, M. (2002). *Teaching and researching listening*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Rungapadiachy, D.M. (1999). *Interpersonal communication and psychology for health care professionals: Theory and practice*. Edinburgh: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Scherer, K.R. (1981). Speech and emotional states. In J.K. Darby (Ed.) *Speech evaluation in psychiatry*. New York: Grune and Stratton.

Silverman, J., Kurtz, S. and Draper, J. (1998). *Skills for communication with patients*. Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press.

Smart, K.L. and Featheringham, R. (2006). Developing effective interpersonal communication and discussion skills. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 69, 276-283.

Stammers, N., Dittmar, H. and Henney, J. (1999). Teaching and learning politics: A survey of practices and change in UK universities. *Political Studies*, 47, 114-126.

Stevens, B. (2005). What communication skills do employers want? Silicon valley recruiters respond. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 42, 2-8.

University of Leeds (2007). *Skills Centre website* available to view at [www.leeds.ac.uk/skillscentre](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/skillscentre) (last accessed 10/06/07).

University of Portsmouth (2007). Communication skills module details available at [http://www.tech.port.ac.uk/tud/db/UnivPort/level\\_2/ComWork1.htm](http://www.tech.port.ac.uk/tud/db/UnivPort/level_2/ComWork1.htm) (last accessed 3/4/07).

Van Dalen, J., Bartholomeus, P., Kerkhofs, E., Lulofs, R., Van Thiel, J., Rethans, J.J., Scherpbier, A.J.J.A., Ven Der Vleuten, C.P.M. (2001). Teaching and assessing communication skills in Maastricht: The first twenty years. *Medical Teacher*, 23, 245-251.

Van Duzer, C (1997) *Improving ESL Learners' Listening Skills: At the Workplace and Beyond*. Available at [http://www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/LISTENQA.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/LISTENQA.html) (last accessed 10/06/07).

White, G. (1998). *Listening*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wilson, M. (2003). Discovery listening – improving perceptual processing. *ELT Journal*, 57, 335-343.

Yang, C., Tsai, I., Kim, B., Cho, M., Laffey, J. (2006). Exploring relationships between students' academic motivation and social ability in online learning environments. *Internet and Higher Education*, 9, 277-286.

Zorn, T.E. and Violanti, M.T. (1996). Communication abilities and individual achievement in organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 10, 139-167.