

# Facilitating Active Listening Using Video-Conferencing: Success Factors, Challenges and Implications for Soft-Skills Training

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## ABSTRACT

While active listening as a basic attitude and practice has been broadly applied and researched in face-to-face settings, its practice in video-conference mediated format is far less investigated. To fill this gap, this paper investigates online active listening and open sharing in an academic course on Communication and Teamwork. The research objective is to find out, how active listening can be acquired in online settings and which features are perceived as most valuable from the perspective of the participants and the facilitator. This paper takes a participatory research approach including a thematic analysis of students' reflections on active listening, their ePortfolios, and their self-evaluations. In a nutshell, the vast majority of students reported significant advances in active listening and open sharing, attributing them to features such as the constructive atmosphere in the meetings, the high relevance of the themes and online resources, and the active participation in break-out rooms, exercises, and group discourse. Nevertheless, participants tended to miss the rich real social contact with their peers! Implications for further research and practice on soft-skills training are derived.

**Keywords:** Active listening online, Person-centered communication, Video-conferencing, Student-centered learning, Participatory action research, soft-skills training, Digital humanism

## INTRODUCTION

Constructive communication and collaboration are indispensable in our society and key to professional as well as private interpersonal relationships that shape our lives (Rogers 1980; Rogers and Farson, 1987; Motschnig and Ryback, 2016). While the capacity to listen well has been profoundly researched in contexts including counseling, coaching, therapy, management, and education, its practice and effectiveness in a video-conference-mediated format are far less investigated (Motschnig and Nykl, 2014). To fill this gap - in particular in the post-Covid-19 time with its boost to online communication - this paper investigates online active listening and its counterpart open sharing in an academic course on Communication and Teamwork. 14 pre-service teachers at the bachelor level participated in the course that - due to contact restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic - was conducted in 7 weekly 3.5-hour online sessions employing the video-conferencing

tool Zoom™. Importantly, the course was based on the Person-Centered Approach (Rogers, 1980, 1983) with its core attitudinal conditions of openness, acceptance, and empathic understanding. With humanistic psychology and pedagogy at the core, the course followed Person-Centered technology-enhanced Learning (Motschnig and Standl, 2013) which is congenial with Digital Humanism, that, according to its manifesto (DIGHUM, 2019) “describes, analyzes, and, most importantly, influences the complex interplay of technology and humankind, for a better society and life, fully respecting universal human rights.”

Aiming at a better understanding of the challenges and benefits of active listening in online interaction, the paper will be of interest to trainers, coaches, instructors, and researchers who may find inspiration, motivation, and resources in promoting constructive communication and improved interpersonal relationships in online and blended educational offerings. Moreover, the implications of the current study for further practice and research on soft-skills training will be discussed.

The central objective of the academic course on Communication and Teamwork is to effectively facilitate students’ acquisition and sustainable improvement of communication and teamwork competencies in light of current and future demands as well as improved interpersonal relationships. In this paper, we take a Participatory Actions Research approach focusing on the following three research questions:

- RQ1: In how far can active listening and open sharing be acquired online?
- RQ2: How do participants evaluate their contribution and learning from the course on communication and teamwork in a pure online versus an on-site blended learning course instance?
- RQ3: Which features of an online course on communication are experienced as most valuable and beneficial and what are the disadvantages of a pure online setting from the perspective of the participants and the facilitator?

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design: Participatory Action Research as Overall Framework**

Action Research has gained recognition for exploring the introduction of information systems into innovative teaching and learning (Baskerville, 1999). Pioneering teachers/facilitators tend to research their practice by reflecting on their educational offering in the form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Ottosson, 2003) following five phases that cyclically repeat themselves: Diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluation, and specifying learning. Thus, we view the Communication and Teamwork course as one PAR cycle into which a thematic analysis of students’ written documents was integrated. This extension of the PAR framework by including thematic analyses supports the systematic and tractable evaluation of specific aspects, activities, and stakeholders. PAR as the overall research framework was chosen because it meets the need for a multi-perspective and participative

approach. It helped to understand the dynamics of the online condition that had been imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and enabled valuable learning.

The facilitator's observations and reflections focused on the process of the online workshops along with any interesting experiences. Furthermore, significant interactions were noted to formulate suitable reflection impulses for students to take up asynchronously and elaborate upon in the ePortfolio. The reflection impulses provided "bridges" or "scaffolds" between the online units and students' asynchronous activities for a smooth and effective connection between the synchronous and asynchronous parts of the course.

### **Participants and Ethics**

14 bachelor-level pre-service teachers (9 male, 5 female) who studied the subject of Computer Science enrolled in the course "Communication and Teamwork" in the winter term 2021/2022. All gave their consent to use their written online contributions for research purposes with the condition that their texts would be published in an anonymized form.

### **Methods Used Within the Action Research Framework**

#### **Data Collection From Online Reaction Sheets and Students' Final Self-Evaluation and ePortfolios**

After each course unit, students were expected to submit online reaction sheets (Motschnig, 2014) in which they would note anything they found worth sharing with their peers and the instructor. At the end of the course, students were invited to submit a free-text self-evaluation, in which they would describe their contribution and learning, significant experiences - if any, and most important their takeaways from the course. Furthermore, students were asked to hand in an online ePortfolio in which they would relate self-selected communication experiences or sources from the literature to the course's content and a pedagogical/technological approach, thus enabling a personalized deepening of the course content and experience.

#### **Data Analysis From Online Reaction Sheets, Students' Final Self-Evaluation, and Their ePortfolio**

A thematic analysis of the texts seemed most promising, as it formed the basis for a clear delineation and the derivation of meaning from the larger themes. Moreover, it required less effort and space for documentation than a more detailed qualitative content of the whole corpus analysis would have needed (Mayring, 2014).

For reasons of focus in this paper, we consider the reactions to just the central 3.5-hour unit that addressed active listening and open sharing. twelve of the 14 students handed in their reactions, amounting to 3,518 words in total. In addition, the self-evaluations of 13 students making up 3,778 words and 13 submitted ePortfolios were read by the author. All statements regarding active listening and the online setting of the ePortfolios – in sum, 2,539 words were considered for the thematic analysis. Interestingly, six students had chosen to explicitly discuss the online condition of the course in their ePortfolios

while eleven students elaborated on the theory and practice of active listening and two of them focused primarily on active listening.

The themes that emerged were, on the one hand, topics that the researcher had introduced inductively, based on the research questions of this paper, and on the other hand, were such that were derived deductively from the students' texts. These formed the corpus of the analysis and amounted to 9,835 words. The researcher read through all texts twice to identify preliminary themes and subthemes, organized them in a table, associated students' statements with them, and in a third round reorganized subthemes plus statements for reducing the cognitive load to finalize major themes. Along the process, the text was examined to find prototypical statements for each of the subthemes. Those will be presented in chapter four and should aid the reader in gaining a more concrete impression.

## **FINDINGS AND EXPERIENCES ALONG THE FIVE PHASES OF THE ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE**

### **Diagnosing**

The course took place from November 2021 to January 2022 during a major lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was the second online course on Communication and Teamwork held purely online by the author who acted as the facilitator. University-wide, the choice of video-conferencing systems was heavily discussed and the University of Vienna provided four systems from which instructors could choose. After having tried out each of them and after careful consideration of numerous criteria, the author chose Zoom™ for its superior user experience which was a key criterion because it enables to focus on the participants and the course goals and minimizes the cognitive effort required for technology handling. Moreover, being the facilitator of the course, I decided to organize the course in a student-centered way and to provide as much contact time as it would have been in the face-to-face mode. This was done to foster experiential learning (Motschnig and Cornelius-White, 2012, 2021). My curiosity about how the course would work out was undeniable.

### **Planning**

To allow intensive interaction, the course proceeded in a blocked mode in seven weekly sessions with each lasting for 3.5 hours, including two breaks and about 15 minutes for informal consultation at the end for any questions or wishes students might want to voice. Synchronous meetings and asynchronous tasks were interleaved to exploit the advantages of both media and minimize their shortcomings (Dennis et al., 2008).

### **Action Taking**

The second unit of the course, which is the main focus of this paper, addressed the key theme of active listening and open sharing along with its relevance as perceived by the participants. At the end of the first unit, students had been suggested to read the excerpt "Active Listening" by Rogers and Farson

(1987). The second unit started with connecting active listening to Rogers' person-centered core attitudes of congruence, positive regard, and empathetic understanding. Students were sent to breakout rooms to explore the relevance of these attitudes for their envisaged jobs as teachers. After collecting students' elaborations in the plenum, students were invited to try out active listening in triads. Each should take on the role of the speaker, the active listener, and the observer. While the speaker would share any concern or personal meaningful or troubling experience for about seven minutes, the listener would accompany the speaker by listening actively to them. The observer would track the process to share their observations once the speaker had finished. After the first round, all would convene in the plenum to share their first experiences and ask questions regarding the exercise. Then students were asked to switch roles and proceed with the second and third rounds of the exercise in the same break-out room in which they had convened for the first round. A detailed final reflection in the plenum and a request to practice active listening in real life and to reflect on it in the reaction sheet ended the second block in which students were exceptionally active!

### **Evaluation**

This section deals with the findings from the thematic analysis of students' written contributions (reactions to the course unit on active listening, students' self-evaluations, and relevant parts of their ePortfolios) regarding the online setting (section 3.4.1) and active listening (section 3.4.2). Subsequently, the facilitator's observations, reflections, and interpretations are articulated.

### **Thematic Analysis Addressing the Online Mode**

Students' versatile statements were arranged according to the following four major themes: Everybody collaborated and spoke up; Pros and Cons of the online mode; Helpful features of the online course; Sustainable, motivated online-learning.

**Everybody collaborated and spoke up:** Even though the speaking time of participants was not equally distributed, all took their turns; which was perceptibly appreciated by the facilitator. Students remarked on this experience with statements such as: "In particular, I liked the exchange and the numerous discussions with the other students throughout the whole course."

"It was a particularly valuable experience that so many students participated actively despite the online format. I have never experienced something like that before."

"[...] even online we were a well-interacting group and I benefited a lot ..."

"The lab course was highly instructive and as a team we all collaborated well and could go into exciting topics and methods that we tried out overtly [...]."

**Pros and Cons of online mode.** This subtheme addresses numerous benefits and drawbacks of the course's online mode thus contributing to the response of RQ3.

On the *positive* side of the course's online mode, students mentioned the larger flexibility of the setting, saving travel time, and using reaction sheets as asynchronous opportunities to express their thoughts between course units.

Representative statements were for example: "My attitude toward the online format had improved during the current term. The online mode has also large benefits that lead to more flexibility.", "The reaction sheets encourage reflection about the unit." A student realized that during a feedback sequence, peers' utterances tend to influence each other whereas online reaction sheets enable one to express independent reflections.

On the *negative* side, participants reported numerous disadvantages of the online setting including the difficulty to stay attentive and to realize when to speak up without interrupting the other; the strenuous effort, in particular, if there are more online courses in sequence; the monotonicity of sitting in front of the computer and glancing into the monitor; distraction when not having a separate room for the videoconferencing; serious concerns about data protection and privacy when using Zoom™; and last but not least the missing social contact and chat with peers, for example during the breaks and before or after the course. Several students concluded that the online mode was inferior to a course held in presence, in particular, if the camera was turned off and communication was the main theme. Illustrative statements included:

"I reflected that the camera makes a considerable difference. With the camera turned on, I don't let myself be distracted so easily. [...] However, in my view, an online format can never come up for face-to-face instruction. I was very much missing the interpersonal aspect in particular in the topics we had dealt with."

"In part, I felt constrained by the format because I do not feel well when using Zoom."

"What is missing most is the contact with peers and sharing with them. Interaction with peers is vitally helpful to reach the objectives and to understand the content."

**Helpful features of the online course:** Students identified numerous features that they appreciated. Most often mentioned were active, collaborative learning and break-out rooms that allowed students to be particularly active in small groups of three to five people. Other features, considered constructive, included the combination of the synchronous video-conferencing units with asynchronous contributions in the form of weekly reaction sheets and the final ePortfolio. The former were visible to all participants and the facilitator and built "bridges" between the units. The latter was intended to be read by the facilitator only and invited deeper fully self-directed reflection and elaboration of any topics related to the course's subject matter. Illustrative students' statements characterizing helpful course features included:

"I found the active and interactive group work and exercises particularly promotive because they strengthened the attention, motivation, and concentration for learning, and made it enjoyable."

"Even though all lessons happened in digital mode, they felt vivid and full of excitement. I felt that I could get to know my peers even though just via the screen."

“I like the fact that we work a lot in break-out rooms, please do keep this up.”

“I learned most through the ePortfolio, in which I could elaborate and deepen the content in a self-directed way, following my own pace.”

**Sustainable, motivated learning:** Despite the online mode, students predominantly stated that they learned a lot, enjoyed the course, interacted with peers, and are going to continue putting their learning into practice. In the words of a student who had rather resented the online format: “Also the practical experiments in my surroundings motivated me strongly and I think I could draw lessons from what I learned and transfer them into my day-to-day living.”

The next section explores students’ takeaways regarding the competence of active listening and open sharing.

### **Thematic Analysis Addressing Active Listening**

This section gracefully confirms that the vast majority of students perceived active listening as a powerful concept enabling democracy and as being something that goes beyond a teaching and learning technique. Some critical reflections illustrate participants’ capability of critical thinking. Moreover, they addressed the open atmosphere of the course, which allowed them to voice whatever was on their minds. Students’ statements were organized into four themes: Learning through and about active listening; Critical perceptions and statements on active listening; Engagement outside the course; Active listening as a significant experience or major takeaway.

**Learning through and about active listening:** Such learning happened in versatile interleaved modes such as reading, watching TED talks, an exercise in triads, reflections in break-out rooms, the plenum, reaction sheets, ePortfolios, self-organized activities outside the course, and last but not least observation and practice during the whole course. Students commented on their learning as follows:

“I was very excited by Rogers and Farson’s article and could relate to their argument very well. [...] and I would suggest it to everybody. It inspired me to reflect on my communication with other persons.”

“Once I read the article [by Rogers and Farson], my first reaction was to share it with all my friends (something that I don’t do often).”

“What I liked, even more, was the active listening experiment in triads. I drew my lessons from it.”

“For me active listening was essential, indeed, because I tend to slip into a discussion fast, immediately telling my opinion. Through the change of roles between speaker and listener, one could “experience” how one feels in such a situation.”

“Through the exercise, I learned that in practice it is difficult to refrain from bringing in one’s opinion into a conversation. I was a great fan of the little experiment and our group had much fun with it, we could have spent a lot more time with it. I think it very much depends on the person and what they need at the moment. I prefer if someone shares their solution or experience with me directly. [...] However, my best friend wants simply that

I just listen to him and he would find a solution on his own, or he already knows his approach and just wants me to confirm it.”

Intriguing insights can be summarized as follows:

By giving others space you learn more for yourself.

“One needs to strongly hold back oneself to understand the perspective of the other fully or properly and CORRECTLY. Much too often, we judge prematurely and grant too little time and respect to our partners’ thoughts. I experienced it in my everyday life with my family, friends, or partner.”

“I think active listening depends on the situation. [...] Definitively I will try to improve my communicative skills through actively trying out this concept and find out for myself when I want and shall apply this concept.”

**Critical perceptions and statements on active listening:** Interestingly, students who expressed their critical thoughts in a conversation predominantly used “I-messages” rather than general judgmental statements. Criticism concerned the following aspects:

“In my view, the method [active listening] could not make much sense. If a person just repeats what I have said, I do not feel eminently understood. I rather feel that the other person can’t follow such as to be able to form their own thought.”

“There was too little time to go into the dynamics. [...] We could easily have spent an hour with feedback. This would have been active and interesting for the students.”

“On the one hand, I liked the exercise, on the other hand, I found the task unsuitable. For me, the prompt ‘talk about something that burdens you personally’ was a bit too private. [...] Other than that I found the task very interesting. [...] Honestly, I felt a bit uneasy in any of the three roles. [...] All in all, the conversation felt unnatural. [...] Despite all this, the exercise was fun and some persons surely would benefit from this method in particular to settle a dispute.”

**Engagement outside the course:** Frequently, students shared to have spent time engaging with active listening and other course content with their friends, family, and partner which does not happen frequently with academic course themes. For example, students reflected:

“This was my first course that filled my free time with very many thoughts regarding the course’s themes. Again and again, I analyzed private conversations with the course’s methods.”

“Through talking about the course’s topics with other persons in my leisure time I could acquire many insights about my way of communicating and what I might and should change. I also gained insight about persons in my life and how their way to communicate influences our relationship and my life.”

**Active listening as a significant experience and major takeaways:** Interestingly, nobody dropped the course prematurely. One student did not submit his ePortfolio and told that he wanted to repeat the course in an on-site instance in the coming term. Students characterized their learnings and takeaways as follows:

“My significant experience happened during the active listening exercise. In any case, I’m going to take with me that I will be more responsive to others,



ask more questions and not always immediately impose my own opinion on them.”

One participant, who in part felt uneasy and not safe when switching on the camera during the meetings shared negative significant experiences. These, however, potentially might have even had some positive impact. She wrote: “Unfortunately, my significant experiences were largely negative. To some extent, I felt uneasy, misunderstood, and insufficiently respected in the group. I think many people were not aware of that. My cognition was that in such randomly composed groups, I do not want to expose myself to unmoderated conversations. [...] I could intensively encounter the themes as soon as I started writing the ePortfolio. [...] I feel excited about how much my life could change if I dealt better with communication. [...] Now I feel that I reached a good basis and I look forward to engaging myself with the theme of communication in the future.”

Another student shared: “One significant experience was being impressed by how different groups and people react. Immediately, versatile perspectives emerge that one would not have considered. [...] In particular through active listening, one somehow acquired more information than one would have imagined initially. [...] Nevertheless, I consider active listening as highly complex and, which needs a lot of practice to be used in a way that doesn’t let the other feel analyzed too much.”

### **Facilitator’s Reflections, Observations, and Interpretations**

For me, genuine interest in reaching the students via person-centered attitudes of openness/transparency, positive regard, and empathetic understanding is as essential as in on-site courses and I was curious how well this can happen online. Person-centered attitudes manifest in active listening and meeting at eye level. (In Zoom “meeting at eye level” can happen when cameras are switched on, even though eye contact tends to be more difficult than in face-to-face encounters.) Undoubtedly, the course experience confirmed that person-centered attitudes enable active, student-centered learning that tends to evoke growth, motivation, significant experiences, and sustainable whole-person learning, whatever medium is chosen. As one student once said: “It’s the instructor’s attitude that shines through and makes the difference far more than the medium.”

While further conclusion cannot be drawn from a single course instance of the Communication and Teamwork course, it is nevertheless tempting to compare students’ quantitative self-evaluations between a quite recent (2018/2019) on-site course instance with its purely digital counterpart in the winter term 2021/2022, As shown in Table 1, which responds to RQ2, the average points that students gave themselves in their estimates on how much they contributed to the course and how much they benefited from the course, were astonishingly similar between the on-site and online course instances!

Interestingly, when comparing the length of the reaction sheets concerning the unit in which the active listening exercise in triads took place, the twelve (out of 14) students of the online course who submitted a reaction in sum wrote 3,518 words, whereas the nine (out of twelve) students of the on-site course wrote 1,582 words. This results in an average number of 175.78

words per on-site student compared to a considerably higher average of 298.42 words per online student. Thus, it seems that the constraints on social contacts during the Covid-19 pandemic and/or the socially more restricted interactions during the online course found their compensation in students' expression via writing and interaction with their family and immediate social environment.

**Table 1.** Comparison of students' self-evaluation between the online course (n = 14) and an on-site course (n = 12) on Communication and Teamwork. Scales from 0 (nothing) to 10 (very much).

Setting/evaluation	Online setting	Face-to-face setting (on-site)
Contributed (average)	7.92 (absolutely; 103)	8.00 (absolutely; 80)
Benefited (average)	8.76 (absolutely; 114)	8.90 (absolutely; 89)

On the technical side, positive user experience and familiarity with the tool is essential to be able to focus on the content. Organizational support regarding the provision of tools that meet data protection and safety requirement is indispensable.

### Specifying Learning

In the following, I describe my learnings and insights as a facilitator hoping they are useful for you, too:

- The risk that students get distracted is larger in online settings than in face-to-face meetings. Thus, good preparation of the activities and a concept for the sequence is needed to avoid unproductive time.
- Breaks, clear, short inputs, activities to keep the attention, and very clear instructions on tasks help to keep participants focused.
- Encourage switching on the camera but don't force it (make it the group's good practice) such that students retain their autonomy over their activities.
- A careful mix of synchronous and asynchronous elements and tasks to meet participants' various learning styles and needs and to maximize the benefits of each medium, helps to include the vast majority of students.
- Students cherish break-out rooms, they nourish collaborative learning.
- If I want to listen to participants well, the chat function needs to get second priority only. This can be shared with students and they can be encouraged to bring attention to chat messages when appropriate.
- Optimally, in online settings the number of participants should not exceed 15.

## DISCUSSION

### Limitations

Due to constrained resources, only two main themes of one course were researched and the thematic analysis was done by one researcher only. Despite these strong limitations, several insights could be gained that can serve as research questions or hypotheses to be investigated in further studies.

## Contribution and Impact

Importantly, the research allowed me to form the hypothesis that even though students equivocally considered the online course mode of Communication and Teamwork inferior to an on-site course, the goal of mediating active listening and open sharing was met to about the same extent as via the on-site course. This response to RQ1 can be derived from the students' reactions, ePortfolios, and self-evaluations. It brings up interesting theoretical as well as practical questions such as finding out what features of the course were responsible for the high convergence between both course modes even though the online course was not a one-to-one copy of the onsite course!

A consequence of reaching comparable quality in mediating active listening competencies via video conferences compared to face-to-face meetings could prove beneficial in multiple ways. For example, participants from different cultures could be more easily reached and invited to online workshops. Also, the inclusion of participants with versatile special needs would be facilitated. These are just two examples of enriching training and making them more accessible, though offering a constrained social channel only. Intriguingly, the majority of students noted that they conversed about active listening and tried it out with social others in their environment. This makes it apparent that they found workarounds to compensate for the social constraints they were exposed to in the online course and thereby even enriched their experience as well as their *self-organized learning* capacities! Moreover, students' feeling that *some aspects of their communication could be improved* tended to be a strong and activating force of learning. All this throws up the research question under what conditions online training complemented by self-organized learning in the 'real world' would be preferable and add value to face-to-face training and instruction.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, Participatory Action Research as the overall research framework proved to be very helpful in reflecting upon active listening and the pure online mode of the course on Communication and Teamwork from the perspective of the participants and the facilitator. As the author, I hope that the admirably rich experience of and with active listening online inspires and provides learning for like-minded educational innovators in academia, industry, governmental institutions, and optimally also in schools. For sure, we need mindful innovators responsibly utilizing digital media to directly pass on their skills, knowledge, and practice to the new generation of trainers, 'lecturers', and students. I am happy to receive any feedback, questions, or inquiries for collaboration.

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