



Teaching and Learning About Positive Deviance: Boosting Metacognition to Grasp Global Communication Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

The National Communication Association's learning outcomes in communication (LOCs) outline what students in the communication discipline need to know and do. This article argues that by teaching and learning about the Positive Deviance (PD) approach in classrooms, LOCs can be effectively promoted. Pedagogy around the PD approach can create conditions for learners to become deeply knowledgeable about how cognition operates, and deliver such global learning outcomes as application of knowledge, appreciation of cultural diversity, the value of perspective taking, and self-efficacy in initiating cross-cultural social and behavioral change. Further, planning and simulating PD interventions in the communication curriculum can foster global learning outcomes, allowing learners to self-discover the value of integrating communication theory and research.

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Introduction

The communication curriculum offers a diversity of theory and research courses – ranging from persuasive to dialogic approaches to communication. These perspectives are not only divergent ways of thinking, they are also offered in separate courses, posing the great challenge of integration. In the field of global communication, theoretical divides and chasms exist (Waisbord & Obregon, 2012), including dichotomies that pit top-down, centralized approaches to change against bottom-up, culture-centered approaches. In light of the dismal record of top-down approaches to international communication and development (Escobar, 1995), bottom-up approaches to global communication have increasingly gained currency (McPhail, 2010; Sastry & Dutta, 2013).

More recently, some communication scholars have argued that social and cultural change is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up matter, preferring to describe it as a dialectical process (Gilbert, 2005; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006; Raco, 2005). For instance, the issue of international aid embodies and illustrates these dialectical tensions (Obregon & Waisbord, 2010; Rahnema, 1990; Waisbord, 2008). International aid brings with it at least two key challenges. First, expert-driven, institutional and ideological pressures (Kwitonda, 2016;

Obregon & Waisbord, 2010; Rahnema, 1990; Waisbord, 2008) justify the necessity of providing conditional aid often subverting indigenous narratives, wisdom, and know-how. Second, rarely is development aid the kind that local beneficiaries find sustainable – that is, once resources are spent, dependencies continue (Singhal & Durá, 2012).

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach, with (1) its focus on valuing local indigenous wisdom, and (2) its potentiality for fostering sustainable change, offers a pathway to mitigate the above-mentioned challenges. PD is a problem-solving approach that based on the premise that every community has individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers with access to the same (or worse) resources and challenges (Singhal & Durá, 2017). In contrast to traditional top-down, problem-solving approaches that begin with an expert-driven analysis of *what is not working* with people – i.e. their needs, deficits, problems, and risks – followed by attempts to plug those gaps, the PD approach focuses on identifying *what is working*, and then amplifying them (Singhal & Durá, 2012, p. 519).

Thus, we argue that teaching and learning about the PD approach provides a framework for supporting the theoretical and curriculum imperatives outlined above. This argument proceeds through five main sections. In the introductory section, we provide a theoretical background to show how the PD approach fits the communication curriculum and the pedagogy of internationalization. In the second section, we describe four pedagogical steps that can be implemented in one class session (of 90 min or so) to introduce the Positive Deviance approach to undergraduate students. In the third section, we show that introducing the PD approach in the four steps, particularly in courses on international communication and cross-cultural change, can not only provide opportunities for participants to buttress their intercultural communication competence and metacognitive skills but also connect theory and practice in global spheres. Although metacognition does not need to be explicit to be useful (Schraw & Moshman, 1995), a conscious access to metacognitive knowledge, especially of the kind that is required to implement a PD intervention, can uniquely foster global and cross-cultural competence. In the fourth section, we discuss how PD fits squarely with, and upholds concretely, the pedagogical principles and learning outcomes in communication (LOCs) including those put forth by the National Communication Association. The last section provides a brief appraisal of PD interventions suggested by students. Here, we show how the suggested interventions provide feedback about students' understanding and debriefing opportunities for the instructor.

Metacognition and Positive Deviance

Metacognitive thinking was originally defined by Flavell (1976) as follows: “I am engaging in metacognition if I notice that I am having more trouble learning A than B; if it strikes me that I should double check C before accepting it as fact” (p. 232). Envisioning the process of facilitating a PD intervention involves two subcomponents of metacognitive thinking namely (1) cognition and (2) regulation of cognition (Schraw & Moshman, 1995). Metacognition scholars have identified declarative knowledge (knowledge of self as a learner), procedural knowledge (knowledge of strategies and procedures of learning), and conditional knowledge (knowing why and where to utilize particular strategies and procedures) as subcomponents of metacognition (Schraw & Moshman, 1995). Table 1 summarizes how teaching

Table 1. National Communication Association’s learning outcomes and metacognitive skills promoted through the PD approach.

Steps in PD classroom activity	Metacognitive processes at work	Learning outcomes in communication (LOCs) realized
Step 1: Prior learning activation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes conscious reflection on communication theories and research methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge application
Step 2: Direct instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes declarative knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the relevance of various ethical perspectives
Step 3: Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a model for self-reflection • Promotes explicit planning, monitoring, and evaluation • Helps students develop procedural knowledge • Helps students develop conditional knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspective taking and cultural diversity • Demonstrate the ability to be culturally self-aware • Employ communication theories, perspectives, principles and concepts • Utilize communication to respond to issues at the local, national, and/or global level
Step 4: Group presentations and debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps students test, evaluate and revise declarative, procedural and conditional PD-relevant knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in active listening • Knowledge application • Demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (Self-efficacy)

Note: Learning outcomes are directly drawn from the NCA’s learning outcomes initiative (Dannels, 2015; Johnson, 2017; Kidd, 2015; Marshall, 2015) while metacognitive processes are adapted from Schraw and Moshman (1995).

and learning about PD, including a grasp of the processes involved in implementing a PD intervention, involves and evokes metacognitive thinking – essential for achieving LOC.

Pedagogical Step 1: Prior Learning Activation

In this step, the instructor asks students to list the different communication theories and research methods they have learned, asking for specific scenarios where the stated theories and methods may be applied. Depending on the student responses, the instructor may introduce PD-centric theories and methods not mentioned by students. Toward the end of this step, the instructor emphasizes that most communication interventions necessarily involve integrating different theories and research skills, setting the stage to introduce the PD approach and its relevance to solving complex social problems.

Pedagogical Step 2: Direct Instruction on PD

In this step, the instructor explains that the PD approach to problem-solving is based on the premise that prior learning experiences limit what we can see – a phenomenon described as *trained incapacity*, *occupational psychosis*, or *bounded rationality* (Singhal & Bjurström, 2015). The story of a mystical Sufi character named Nasirudin is often used to illustrate the central notion of trained incapacity:

In one of his many incarnations, Nasirudin, the mystical Sufi character, appears on earth as a smuggler. Each evening Nasirudin arrives at the customs checkpoint riding his donkey, with other donkeys loaded with bags in tow. The customs inspector, intent on nailing Nasirudin, would feverishly search the contents of the hung baskets, finding nothing of interest. Years go by, the search routine continues, and Nasirudin grows richer and richer. Now old, Nasirudin retires from smuggling. One day he meets the customs inspector, now also retired, in a coffee shop. “Tell me, Nasirudin,” pleads his former adversary, “now that you have nothing to hide, and I have nothing to find, what were you smuggling all these years?” Nasirudin smiles. “Donkeys, of course!” (Singhal & Durá, 2012, p. 508)

The instructor proceeds to explain that like Nasirudin’s donkeys, often the answers to the problems we are trying to solve are right there in front of us but we are unable to see them – i.e. we are incapacitated by our training. Akin to Nasirudin’s donkeys, there exist individuals in every community who have solved a problem more effectively than their peers with equal or less resources, but they remain hidden in plain sight. Here the case study of fighting childhood malnutrition in Vietnam (Singhal & Durá, 2012) provides a simple illustration for students to grasp how the PD approach led to the identification of *hidden solutions* from within the community which were then amplified and scaled locally, regionally, and nationally (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010).

In Vietnam, realizing that expert-driven, aid-centered malnutrition programs were not sustainable, global health practitioners deployed PD as an alternative approach. They worked with local community members to weigh children under the age of five, plotted their growth charts, and visually mapped these children based on their nutritional status. The visual mapping led them to self-discover that a few very poor families had well-nourished children – the positive deviants. They were deviants in a statistical sense as what they were doing was not normative, and positive because their deviance yielded positive nutritional outcomes. They learned from these PD families that their success was due to collecting and

adding unusual sources of protein (the pulp of tiny shrimps and crabs from rice paddies) and essential micronutrients (sweet potato leaves) to children's regular meals. The instructor must emphasize here that these food sources were not considered as edible by local cultural mores. Shrimps and crabs were not looked upon as being suitable foods for children and sweet potato greens were used as animal fodder or served as compost. Before moving to the next application step (whereby students envision facilitating their own PD interventions), the instructor should emphasize that PD interventions are most appropriate for complex behavioral issues with several intertwined underlying causes (like malnutrition), and not for problems that have a technical solution (like administering an antibiotic). The instruction also needs to highlight that PD interventions are action-based, that is, learning and adoption of desired behaviors happen by *doing* what positive deviants do. The instructor may give examples of different applications of the PD approach, including in educational settings to boost graduation rates (Singhal, 2013; Singhal & Bjurström, 2015) and in health care contexts to reduce hospital-acquired infections, improve cancer screenings, and manage diabetes (Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010, 2014).

Pedagogical Step 3: PD Application

This step should be carried out in a small group setting whereby students discuss and identify problems that can be addressed by utilizing the PD approach. The instructor must raise questions on why their chosen problem is appropriate for the PD approach (i.e. Is the intervention targeting a complex behavioral issue? Does data exist (or need to be collected) to identify positive deviants?. Students discuss what kind of communication skills will be needed to identify positive deviants, to discover their uncommon and replicable behaviors, and to design programs where people can practice those behaviors (in contrast to being told and shown the PD behaviors). Such consideration includes ways of communicating with and gaining access to community – i.e. trust building, community-driven data collection, collation, and assessment so they can self-discover the presence of positive deviants, including their uncommon behaviors that lead them to solve the problem.

Pedagogical Step 4: PD Group Presentations and Debriefing

This final step consists of group presentations and debriefing and reflecting on the previous three steps. Each group presentation provides the instructor an opportunity to provide feedback on the students' understanding of the PD concept and their proposed implementation of the PD intervention. At the end of the group presentations, the instructor may ask participants about what really stood out to them as being novel about the PD approach, including the relationship between PD and normative communication theory and practice. This allows the instructor to highlight the interdependence of communication theories and research methods as key components of implementing positive deviance interventions.

For independent study and a more in-depth understanding of the context surrounding PD and related interventions, the instructor may provide a hand out of selected readings, including several that are presented in the reference list of the present article.

PD Pedagogy and Communication Curriculum Outcomes

The process of implementing a PD-centric lesson in four steps (as outlined above) allows communication instructors and students to effectively accomplish National Communication Association's learning outcomes in communication studies (LOCs), including perspective taking along with appreciation for cultural diversity (e.g. the ability to participate and learn from perspectives and experiences that are different from one's own and to recognize how one's perspective informs and limits one's knowledge), and competence in knowledge application (Johnson, 2017). In terms of the latter outcome, the PD approach may, for example, help students navigate practical challenges that have characterized participatory communication at both local and global levels (e.g. see Waisbord, 2008) because, according to Johnson (2017), knowledge application enhances "the integrated and systemic understanding of the interrelationships between contemporary and past challenges facing cultures, societies, and the natural world on the local and global levels" (p. 12).

In the following section, we discuss how simulating PD interventions impacts LOCs by evoking a metacognition of related theories and research skills. That is, participating in simulated implementations of PD interventions fundamentally requires metacognitive skills to be able to think about one's own thinking. Similar to the story of Nasirudin's donkeys – i.e. the solutions are hiding in plain sight – requires perspective-taking, a global learning outcome described by Johnson as "the ability to engage and learn from perspectives and experiences different from one's own and to understand how one's place in the world both informs and limits one's knowledge" (p. 11).

By privileging social and action-based learning, PD-centric pedagogy also promotes global communication outcomes pertaining to the application and integration of communication courses (Johnson, 2017). Carrying out PD research and intervention in consort with the community involves a variety of intercultural communication skills, including trust-building, dialogic inquiry, reframing, self-discovery, horizontal communication, and social modeling (Singhal, & Durá, 2012). PD interventions also aim to collaboratively discover organic and actionable solutions to a variety of behavioral problems. Akin to the use of culture circles in Freirean pedagogy, participants engage in PD interventions by identifying unique patterns in the data (i.e. are there positive outliers/deviants). This process leads to different ways of problem-posing, including looking at problem-solving from the perspective of those who have already solved the problem. This approach fosters new and appreciative ways of seeing the world – in terms of assets and existing capabilities instead of deficits and gaps (Souto-Manning (2010a). This pedagogical process is cyclical, recursive, and generative because, like Freirean culture circles, PD interventions involve participants in framing (or naming), problem posing/or problematizing, and reframing/renaming (Souto-Manning, 2010b). In so doing, participants end up, metacognitively-speaking, at a different place than where they began.

Teaching and learning about the PD approach naturally emphasizes the application of dialogic communication processes, including empathic listening, trust building, and a value for diverse perspectives among stakeholders. This dialogic and participatory process is more horizontal (side-by-side) and bottom-up communication (Singhal, & Durá, 2012). As the discovery of positive deviants in the Vietnam malnutrition case illustrated, self-discovery and reframing of the problem – i.e. focusing on what is working, entail metacognitive learning – learning from reflecting on experience (Dewey, 1938; Kidd, 2015). Such is

accomplished through reflecting on data collected (i.e. are there positive deviants who are succeeding against all odds or with no extra resources?). This problem posing process, as in all PD applications, begins with collecting and making sense of data with community members. Thus, data collected before and after PD interventions serve as empirical evidence of PD effectiveness. For example, in the case of Vietnam, the PD project began with 65% of the children being malnourished, and recorded an 85% reduction in malnutrition after a 2 year period of piloting a PD-based nutrition intervention.

Engaging in peer-led, action-based learning represent instances of metacognition rooted in social learning theory (Bandura, 1997) and cultural learning models such as cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). People learn new behaviors from people who are similar to them through a process known as social proof (Cialdini, 2008). The notion of social proof – that someone like me is doing something and making it work – dovetails beautifully with the concept of horizontal communication, allowing students to expand mindsets beyond top-down and bottom-up dichotomies, demonstrating that sustainable cross-cultural change can occur through a dialectical and dialogic exchange between stakeholders.

The PD approach also creates an opportunity for students to reflect on the concept of “social proof” as a mechanism for peer-led modeling and learning. Students learn that positive deviants are the ones who effectively and sustainably teach the new behavior to new learners because they constitute proof that it is possible to solve a problem in the same cultural, social, and economic milieu (Feldman, Campbell, & Lai, 1999). Thus, students learn that facilitating PD interventions entails knowledge of cognition and the regulation of cognition.

Teaching and learning about PD can assist in advancing learning outcomes including engaging in communication inquiry, integration and ethical application of communication knowledge, utilizing communication to embrace difference and creating messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context among others (Johnson, 2017). For instance, PD interventions tend to combine dialogic communication and social proof – a key principle of effective persuasion (Cialdini, 2008). Students often express appreciation of learning about PD because it helps them discern how to marry the two modes of communication – top-down and bottom-up – that are regarded as being ethically disparate. Because it derives wisdom from and is applied in a similar cultural context of peer learning, the principle of social proof is ethically justified and culturally appropriate. This realization is particularly important in contexts of international interventions involving aid where participatory communication and culture-centered solutions are uniquely difficult to implement (Kwitonda, 2016; Waisbord, 2008).

Appraisal

The introduction to the PD approach is usually quite easily understood by students. The pedagogical activities described above reflect sessions conducted by the authors in typical undergraduate classes in the United States. Debriefing questions and responses from students indicate that they find the background stories (Nasiruddin’s donkeys and the Vietnam story) that illustrate trained incapacity and the discovery of positive deviants quite engaging. Students introduced to the concept of PD are generally eager to apply the PD concept to salient problems in their communities. For example, students have suggested PD interventions

to identify Hispanic women who have low rates of cancer screenings even though they are at the highest risk. The guiding PD question in this case was: are there Hispanic women, over the age of 40, who live in the lowest income zip code have no medical insurance, but who have gone for at least two cancer screenings in the past three years? In another case, PD approach was applied to study diabetes management among Hispanic men. The PD inquiry was guided by asking: are there Hispanic men above the age of 40 with family history of diabetes, who have been able to maintain healthy sugar levels, with no or minimal medication?

Some of the PD interventions that students may propose may not necessarily lend themselves to application and can be rectified by the instructor during group discussions. For example, some students suggested a PD intervention aimed at identifying students who pass a class without attending classes. Although such students show extraordinary ability with less resources (compared to those who go to class and may thus be thought of as *deviants*), they fail to meet the criteria of “positive” because skipping class is not a positive action. Here, it is important to remind students of the combinatorial necessity implied by the phrase *positive deviance*: whoever is identified as a deviant must also be doing the right thing to meet the dual characteristic implied by the notion of positive deviance.

Conclusion

Engaging in PD-centered pedagogy activates declarative knowledge as we become aware of what we know about our cognition (Schraw & Moshman, 1995), including our blind spots in learning and problem-solving. That is, such activities require stakeholders to rethink normative ways of solving problems by looking at unusual places and individuals (Singhal, 2013). Procedural knowledge involves knowing, for example, that facilitating PD interventions requires use of action-based procedures and processes led by peers and not by the expertise of the outsider facilitator of the PD. As in Freirean culture circle pedagogy, the outside facilitator acts only as “a facilitator who takes on the role of an ethnographer, learning about the culture of the learners’ community” (Souto-Manning, 2010a, p. 19). The key point here is that PD requires a very different kind of change agent expertise. The expertise lies in *giving up* expertise, believing that the wisdom to solve the problem lies with positive deviants. The facilitator’s role is to facilitate such a process, create the conditions for data to be collected and analyzed so that positive deviants can be identified, and then have communities can self-discover what PD practices are uncommon and replicable.

Conditional knowledge is also involved as PD interventions are appropriate for behavioral but not technical problems. As such, envisioning the process of facilitating a PD intervention involves both planning the intervention process and regulation of cognition. This reflective process, in turn, entails not only integration of communication theories ranging from dialogic inquiry and participatory communication to social learning but also how those theories facilitate cognition and learning. Such competences can play a crucial role in advancing key communication learning outcomes particularly those that seek to promote cross-cultural approaches, ideas, and activities in the communication curriculum. Cross-cultural experiences such as study abroad programs and various international interventions require cross-cultural communication competence. The PD approach allows for the application of various research and theoretical approaches in communication in order to build trust and meaningful partnerships among cross-cultural intervention stakeholders.

Acquisition of such skills play a decisive role in the realization of learning outcomes in communication studies (LOCs) particularly global learning outcomes such as perspective taking, cultural diversity, and knowledge application (Johnson, 2017; Wahl, Williams, Berkos, & Disbrow, 2016).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

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