

# The Power of Perceptions: Exploring Individual Perceptions Through Activity-Based Learning

Christine Spudich & Dimana Spudich

**Course:** *Interpersonal communication*

**Objective:** *Students will demonstrate how perceptions relate to interpersonal communication*

## Rationale

In its most basic form, perception is defined as the knowledge people have of objects or of movements by direct and immediate contact (Piaget, 1981). Early cognitive psychologists analyzed perception as a selection model where messages are filtered and information is processed for meaning (Broadbent, 1958). Perceptions were often associated with memory processes and theorists believed perception was strongly selective along the lines of the perceiver's interests (Bartlett, 1932). Other perception concepts, such as schemas describe how we interpret and organize information. According to Piaget (1977), schemas are conceptual models used to assimilate or accommodate new information. Incoming information is organized into existing schemas or the existing schemas are altered to accommodate new information.

The purpose of this activity is to help students understand how their perceptions are individual and how their perceptions influence their interpersonal communication. During the activity, several volunteers, referred to as guests, will be present in the classroom. Based on the students' observations and perceptions, they will have to select which guests they believe are knowledgeable about general topic areas, such as travel and technology. Students work independently and in small groups, and will realize how their perceptions influence their communication.

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Christine Spudich, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), Edwardsville, USA. Email: jcdmac@yahoo.com. Dimana Spudich, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, USA. Email: jcd27@charter.net

## Activity

For this activity, one preliminary step is necessary. Instructors need to entrust colleagues or friends to serve as guests. The purpose of the guests is to show students that they continuously observe and create perceptions of people they meet everyday. For students to form original perceptions of the guests, the guests must be strangers. Instructors can have guests represent various ages, genders or ethnic groups. If instructors find it difficult to recruit guests of different genders or ethnic groups, they can invite undergraduate or graduate students as guests.

In advance, arrange for the guests to be in the room at the start of class and have them sit near the front. Begin the lesson by telling students that guests are visiting today. Allow each guest to give a brief introduction. After the introductions, allow 3 minutes for students to write their individual perceptions of each guest while the guests walk around the room. During this time, the instructor will create a chart like the one shown to record the totals for the students' questions.

Daniel's Total	Marie's Total	Chester's Total
Question # 1—	Question # 1—	Question # 1—
Question # 2—	Question # 2—	Question # 2—
Question # 3—	Question # 3—	Question # 3—

After students have recorded their individual perceptions, have them number their notebook paper one through three. There is no right or wrong answer; it all depends on which guests students perceive are the most knowledgeable about the questions. Instructors will write the three questions on the chalkboard or on a PowerPoint slide and may use course content, such as relationships or workplace situations to represent topics. The questions provided serve as a springboard for discussion:

1. You just inherited \$10,000 and you must invest it. Who would you ask for investment advice?
2. You received a new computer as a gift. Who would you ask to help you install it?
3. Your two-week vacation is approaching. Who would you ask for travel recommendations?

Based on their perceptions of the guests, students will determine which guest is best suited to answer each question. For example, if students believe guest Daniel can best answer question one, they will write his name on their paper next to number one. Also, tell students they may have to communicate with guests at the end of the activity. If students know they may communicate with a guest, this may affect how they pair questions with guests.

When finished, students come row by row to the board to record their answers on the chart. Reconvene the class and tell students they will share their individual perceptions and thoughts about the chart. In small groups, students will compare and

contrast their individual perceptions with other classmates' perceptions. Students can also address the following questions in their groups.

- Why do you think a majority of the class selected guest Daniel for question two (or whatever the case may be)?
- Why was a majority not reached for any of the guests? (if this is the case)
- What conclusions can you make about the chart and the class perceptions?

After approximately 5 minutes, reconvene and have a class discussion about each group's perceptions and their overall thoughts. During this time, the guests should leave the class. Instructors may supplement the class discussion with a short lecture about perceptions using the debriefing questions given. Near the end of class, the guests return to "present" themselves and describe their education and vocation to the class. By doing so, students compare their original perceptions with the reality of the guests' lives.

### **Debriefing**

For students to fully understand the instructor's learning objectives, inform them about the lesson's purpose. Re-emphasize to students why they developed their individual perceptions paragraphs, why they discussed their perceptions in groups, and finally debrief them about the guests' visit. To encourage discussion, ask the following questions:

1. Why was it important that everyone record their individual perceptions about each guest? When you were creating your paragraph, how did you decide what to write? Encourage students to think about the interpretations they made based on their observations. Sometimes students are not able to articulate their thinking on this matter. Elaborate by referring to schemas and scripts, which are usually mentioned in textbook chapters concerning perceptions.
2. How did your individual perceptions influence which guest to pair with each question? This question pertains to whether students observe and perceive stimuli consistently or differently. Students saw the guests from their own angle. Students in the back of the room had their own "view" of the guests, stressing that not everyone "sees" something from the same perspective. It is more than just their physical placement in class that affects how they "see" something; it is an overall understanding of how people individually perceive everyday occurrences.
3. Knowing that you may have had to communicate with the guests, how did that affect which guest to pair with each question? How can you explain your reasoning for pairing your questions with guests? The purpose of these questions is to help students understand how perceptions and communication may differ based on whether students thought they were going to communicate with the guests.

## Appraisal

Instructors should assess student learning to determine whether learning objectives were met. Have students write a 5-minute reflection paper on what they learned. The purpose of the paper is to have students understand that their perceptions are individual and influence their subsequent communication and interactions. The instructor's goal is to assess students' learning, students' reactions to the class activity and how they connected perceptions to their real-life communication. Students will address the following components:

- Draw on information from the guests' visit and from the small group activity in which they compared and contrasted their perceptions
- Describe how their perceptions affect their communication with people now and in the future

When time is called, students can compare/contrast their thoughts with a partner and have some pairs share their reflections with the class. If time permits, ask students the following: "If you had to explain what you learned today, what would you say?" Allow students two minutes to write their responses and have three or four volunteers share their responses. Collect the papers, read them and categorize the responses as collected data to analyze learning outcomes and explore future considerations for this activity.

Instructors can modify this activity by including guests of different sex or age to demonstrate gender or age perceptions. With intercultural communication, instructors can generate discussions about first impressions or stereotypical perceptions. Scholars have determined that many variables affect our perceptions and that our perceptions are influenced by characteristics, such as gender and age (Ron, 2007). When students perceived the guests, they may have used stereotypes and this can lead to discussions about the purpose and drawbacks of stereotypes. Instructors can include clips from films, such as *Pretty Woman* or *Selena* to convey how clothing and ethnic background influences perceptions. Numerous modifications can be made to highlight various concepts for communication classes.

## References and Suggested Readings

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