Concise Guide for Running Communication Skills Session Online

In this document we provide guidance on conducting small group communication skills sessions using a learner centered approach to communication skills practice as a framework. The guide focuses on using Zoom and its accompanying tools for these sessions (similar features are available on several other virtual meeting applications such as Webex, Microsoft teams, Jitsi etc). More detailed guidance is available [here](#).

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I. DESIGN AND PREPARATION OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION SESSIONS		
	PRINCIPLES FOR IN PERSON OR ONLINE COMMUNICATION SKILLS SESSION	ONLINE ADAPTATIONS AND TOOLS
Session objectives	Learning objectives help identify the expected outcomes of the session and guide the teaching methods you plan to use	Online learning should ideally be **no longer than 2 hours** at most to maintain attention. You may need to **condense your objectives** to just those that can be reasonably achieved using virtual methods. If longer than 2 hours build in times for short comfort breaks.
Supplemental materials		Consider **supplemental materials (Documents, PPT slides, video examples)** that can be reviewed outside of the sessions to enhance learning. Accessing materials prior to the session can help prepare learners for role-play during session. During the session itself materials can be shared in real time by posting link to relevant resources in chat. Post session materials can aid further learning, increase recall e.g. evidence base relating to specific skills or models.
Session participants and group size	For experiential learning, group size should allow each participant time to learn through practicing and receiving feedback. For example, 5-6 students per session	Online, the larger the group the less engagement and chance for individual practice. Because time needs to be limited consider **learner groups no larger than 5-6**. If you usually work with larger groups, then consider dividing your groups and running consecutive sessions.
Accessibility and technology	For in-person groups, make sure all materials (handouts, skills cards) and necessary technology (computer, projector, flipchart/pens, video recording) are available. Test them before session starts.	Consider with **what devices** your learners (and facilitator and SP) will be connecting to the session. Encourage participants to join by computer rather than phone or tablet to be able to use full Zoom features more easily. Have learners **test use of technology** including video, microphone, headphones beforehand to allow problem solving prior to session. Some Browsers such as Chrome allow for a more stable Zoom connection.
Co-facilitators	If using co-facilitators, arrange a discussion ahead of time to establish how roles and tasks will be divided.	**Co-facilitators** are especially helpful when teaching online, where one person leads the session and the other monitors such things as waiting room, chat comments, etc. Person with these tasks could even be a learner. Helpful to ensure co-facilitators are made 'co-host' at beginning of session to enable access to all functions.
Security		See [detailed information this link does not work](#) for security settings e.g. no private chats in chat function, if preferred, ensuring codes are required to join a session and no recording of sessions without explicit attendee permission.
Facilitator and simulated patient (SP) training and preparation	Meeting with facilitators and SPs is important to discuss what is expected and practice key steps before a live session. Facilitator(s) and SP should plan to meet at least briefly before a session begins to discuss any questions about the session and agree level of complexity/emotions etc	Providing **online training for facilitators and SPs** in addition to written guides can be important for increasing their skill and confidence in transferring this teaching online. It is recommended that **facilitators and SPs meet online at least 15-20 minutes before** the learners join. This not only helps to identify any potential technical difficulties but also allows time for discussion and answering any questions about the day's learning
Before session starts	Facilitators review session guide and that room is set up appropriately	Set-up the Zoom meeting early to make sure audio, video etc. is working. Facilitators should try to work in a quiet area and with a non-distracting background. Check your video image is clear and that you are positioned with the light focused on your face, looking directly at the screen.

II. INITIATING A COMMUNICATION SKILLS SESSION			
STEPS	PRINCIPLES FOR IN PERSON OR ONLINE COMMUNICATION SKILLS SESSION	ONLINE ADAPTATIONS AND TOOLS	ZOOM INSTRUCTION LINKS
Introductions and checking in	If a new group, everyone (you, learners, SP) should introduce themselves. If an SP is there from beginning, have them introduce themselves out of role Some facilitators recommend a brief check-in such as "*How is the week going" or "How is school going*" as a way to gain participants full attention.	Introduce yourself. Make sure **learners' names** appear on their Zoom profiles. Have learners introduce themselves if not already known to you. **Check that all participants can see and hear effectively**. During Covid-19 in particular, it can be helpful to briefly check in with *"how are you coping"*. This could be done verbally or using the Chat function, where students can reply with their thoughts. If recording the session, inform participants of how it will be used (e.g. shared with students who could not attend) and gain consent.	How to change profile name - can hover over your video tile and right click to see rename option Participants should use gallery view so they can see everyone Using Zoom Chat function How to record a Zoom session
Orientation to session/ground rules	Provide an outline of session objectives and how the session will run (e.g. Identify challenges, everyone will practice briefly, get feedback and re-rehearse) Discuss the ground rules for session including confidentiality, respect, participation and the principles of constructive feedback.	Additional ground rules for Zoom sessions: Using **headphones** will decrease outside noise and echoes Encourage everyone to keep their **video on but muted** – unless otherwise instructed – as this will increase engagement and ability to see student reactions. When they want to contribute, encourage raising of hands (physically or using nonverbal reactions in participants tab in Zoom)	Either at bottom of zoom screen or in participants/chat window can click video on/off and mute/unmute Using the non-verbal reaction tools in Zoom
Beginning session content	Prior to beginning the role-plays, it can be useful to engage the group in reflection about the communication topic for the session (e.g. history taking, responding to emotions, etc.). Options for doing this include: - Learner experience with topic - Anticipated challenges with communication task - Presentation or co-creation of a framework for addressing issue (e.g. SPIKES for bad news telling)	For online reflection/discussion several tools can be used: - Pair/Share – put students into breakout rooms in smaller groups to discuss issues and then return to large group to share. - Use white board function to write down and save group ideas or framework - Use chat function for learners to write ideas/challenges/etc - Show PPTs with content/framework information - Show a video as a trigger that learners can analyze - Poll learners about their experiences	• Setting up Breakout rooms • Sharing a whiteboard • Chat function • Sharing your PPT screen sharing • Maximizing video viewing • Using Zoom polling

III. ROLE PLAY SET-UP			
STEPS	PRINCIPLES FOR IN PERSON OR ONLINE COMMUNICATION SKILLS SESSION	ONLINE ADAPTATIONS AND TOOLS	ZOOM INSTRUCTION LINKS
Setting the scene	Describe details of how the session will work, including whether or not all learners will have the chance to role-play and for how long. Remind the learner they can "timeout" if needed or you will stop them when enough learning has been generated.	Consider having all learners except the one conducting the role play (and the simulated patient) **turn off their video** during roleplay. This can help the interaction feel more authentic. Acknowledge that role-play, especially virtually, may feel less than authentic at times. Clarify if this encounter is meant to simulate an in-person encounter or a telehealth visit.	Ask Learners to select **Hide non-video participants** in the video settings menu, found next to the video camera icon.
Case information	Describe patient case: Either facilitator or SP "I have come to clinic to be seen about my foot". Describe student role: Are they a student interviewing patient or pretending to be a qualified physician?	The facilitator or SP can change their screen name to that of the 'patient' being interviewed to avoid confusion. Provide any additional information such as a letter from the referring GP. This can be done electronically beforehand or by sharing brief case description in chat.	How to change profile name - can hover over your video tile and right click to see rename option screen sharing
Recruiting learners to role play	Recruit by asking for volunteers, selecting the learner based on challenges identified earlier, or order in which they are sitting	Recruitment can be done the same as in person. Chat can be used to record the intended order of role-play.	Chat function
Identify learner's initial agenda	After sharing the task (for example, starting the first few minutes of the interview) ask the learner what they would like to try and what they might want feedback focused on.	Consider using the whiteboard function or Chat to write down the learner's agenda	Sharing a whiteboard
Prepare group to watch the encounter	Encourage all learners to take notes on their observations in terms of effective behaviors as well as areas they have questions about or that could benefit from change. Assign specific observation tasks to learners such as the role player's agenda and common skills such as non-verbal, questioning style, developing rapport, etc.	To enhance online engagement and participation in feedback, **assigning specific observation tasks** is particularly helpful to maintain learner engagement during roleplay and subsequent discussion. The facilitator should note which task is assigned to each student. If relevant, acknowledge that not all will give feedback every time. This is helpful in avoiding overwhelming the learner.	
Watch the encounter	Take notes during encounter and encourage students to note specific communication behaviors. Watch the timing. You might stop at an appropriate moment which has been decided on ahead of time.	Have **all but the SP and student role player turn off** their videos and mute themselves. Encourage all learners to have their screens in Gallery view and use the hide non-video participants setting. This will ensure that just the simulated patient and role-playing student are on screen.	If wanting a learner to observe and feedback specifically on patients verbal and non-verbal cues ask them to '**Pin' the Patient** Zoom view

IV. FEEDBACK AND RE-REHEARSAL			
STEPS	**PRINCIPLES FOR ANY SESSION**	**ONLINE ADAPTATIONS**	**ZOOM INSTRUCTION LINKS**
Acknowledge learner's feelings	Start by asking the learner their feelings about the encounter.	Could include their reflections on how they felt it worked doing the interaction virtually?	
Refine learner's agenda and desired outcomes	Once the above is done, the support the learner in refining their agenda as a way to guide feedback. Question options include: What in particular they would like feedback about? What they did effectively and what they would change? What parts were particularly tricky? What were they trying to accomplish?	Same as in-person	
Feedback and discussion of alternative approaches	In response to the learner's agenda, options for starting feedback include: - Asking SP first (if issues raised were relating to the SP reactions). - Asking specific learner in group if they were asked to focus on a particular area.	Have all learners turn video on and unmute for this section. Encourage turning to SP first for what they noticed and using group in particular for brainstorming other approaches May be particularly important to **watch for cues** from role playing learner, and check in explicitly about how they are feeling about feedback	Either at bottom of zoom screen or in participants/chat window can click video on/off and mute/unmute
Re-rehearsal and feedback	Set time limit for the to learner choose one aspect of their role-play to re-rehearse.	For brief re-rehearsal ask learner if they prefer videos off or on.	
Sequential role play for multiple learners	Using steps described above, another learner can either re-start the role play from the beginning or the learner-SP encounter can continue from where it stopped. The new learner can summarize what they know so far for the SP prior to moving on from there.	Same as in-person.	

V. CLOSING THE SESSION			
STEPS	PRINCIPLES FOR ANY SESSION	ONLINE ADAPTATIONS	ZOOM INSTRUCTION LINKS
Generalizing learning and skills	Add any additional insights from your practice, course objectives etc. If a list of challenges was generated at the beginning of session, re-visit this and discuss any gaps.	Add any additional insights, including any substantive information on PowerPoint etc. Return to white board to review challenges and discuss	Zoom screen sharing Sharing a whiteboard
Take home points	Ask learners to identify one take home point to enhance their retention.	Learners can give take home points online either verbally or using chat or tools such as Padlet.	Zoom Chat function Padlet https://en-gb.padlet.com/
Evaluation	Evaluating sessions provides insight into the session's impact, strengths and areas for improvement	Consider having the learner group complete an evaluation. This can be through polling or and embedded link. Place particular emphasis on what worked and what could be improved.	