Making Communication Theory Tangible Through Public Engagement Projects

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Abstract

Bridging the gap between communication theory and practice is an enduring challenge in communication education. This article reflects on the redesign of a final project in a *Human Communication* course to incorporate public engagement as a central element. Students worked in small groups to select a communication concept, design an interactive public-facing activity, and reflect on its impact in relation to course theories. Compared to previous semesters that relied on traditional written reports, this format enhanced motivation, deepened conceptual understanding, and strengthened transferable skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving. Drawing on anonymised student reflections and instructor observations, the article analyses learning outcomes, compares this approach with conventional assessments, and considers how public interaction influences theory application. It also outlines challenges encountered, including time management, resource constraints, and audience unpredictability, and offers recommendations for future implementation. The insights shared aim to guide educators in designing experiential, audience-focused assessments within communication curricula.

Bringing Communication Theory to Life

Bridging the gap between abstract theory and practical engagement is vital in communication education. Traditional essays can demonstrate conceptual understanding but often lack authentic, real-time interaction. In contrast, public engagement requires students to translate theory into accessible language and adapt to unpredictable audiences, which are skills essential for communication graduates.

In the Human Communication course at Xiamen University Malaysia, the final assessment was redesigned to emphasise public-facing application. Instead of a conventional written report, students selected a communication concept and developed an activity to demonstrate it to non-specialist audiences. This aligns with calls for learning designs that enhance behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Godsk *et al.*, 2025). The following sections outline the project's structure and outcomes.

Designing the Public Engagement Project

The assessment aimed to achieve two intertwined goals: raise public awareness about a key aspect of communication, and encourage better communication practices within the community. Working in groups of six, students selected a topic from the syllabus, such as non-verbal communication, perception, listening, or intercultural communication, and developed a public engagement activity. Creativity and accessibility were emphasised, with assessment criteria rewarding originality, theoretical grounding, and the ability to communicate ideas to a non-specialist au-

dience.

The project was carried out by second-year, first-semester students enrolled in a Human Communication course, comprising a class of 26 students. They worked in four groups of six to seven members each, although this article highlights three representative projects. Public participants were primarily members of the campus community at Xiamen University Malaysia, including students from different faculties, international students, and occasionally administrative staff. Across all groups, approximately 15–20 participants per project engaged in the activities, either through on-site booths, guided interactions, or social media-based components.

Activities were conducted at high-traffic campus locations such as B1 Block, A3 Library, and the D6 canteen, selected for their accessibility and diversity of passers-by. These open, informal environments simulated real-world communication settings where unpredictability is expected, making them ideal for testing how communication concepts operate beyond the classroom. The combination of physical booths, listening simulations, gesture-based guessing games, and digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Instagram) enabled students to communicate theory in ways that were experiential, creative, and audience-responsive.

Projects followed three phases: planning (identifying the audience, developing a rationale for topic selection, and designing the activity), execution (delivering the public-facing activity, whether as a physical event, online campaign, or hybrid format), and reflection (submitting a group report linking the project outcomes to communication theory and discussing lessons learned). Experiential, community-engaged learning approaches like service learning have been shown to promote sustainability competencies across disciplines in higher education contexts (Rodríguez-Zurita *et al.*, 2025). By moving from theory to action, students applied concepts in authentic contexts, echoing best practices in experiential and community-based learning (Healey *et al.*, 2014; Kolb, 1984).

Three Student Projects in Action

Three projects from the most recent semester illustrate the variety and creativity of student approaches. Each group interpreted the public engagement brief differently, resulting in three distinctive projects that combined theory, creativity, and real-time public interaction.

Listen to Connect – Active Listening Challenge
Students set up a public booth to run short listening exercises, guiding participants through the five stages of listening. Participants reported becoming more conscious of attention lapses, reinforcing the theory's real-world relevance. One passer-by commented, "I never realised how quickly my mind wanders until I had to really listen."

Expression Without Borders –
Intercultural Non-Verbal Communication
Using photos and videos of gestures from different cultures, participants guessed their meanings. This light-hearted format sparked deeper conversations about high- and low-context communication styles. Many participants expressed surprise at how easily gestures could be misunderstood, highlighting the importance of cultural awareness. This aligns with the evolving theory of transformative learning, which underscores shifts in cultural perspective and reflective engagement as catalysts for deep learning (McClain, 2024).

Hear or Listen – Distinguishing
Hearing from Listening
In two contrasting environments – one quiet, one full of distractions – participants listened to short stories and answered comprehension questions. Differences in recall underscored the role of environmental noise in communication. Several participants commented that the exercise made them more aware of how small distractions can undermine understanding.

What Students Gained

Compared to past semesters' written reports, this format generated greater enthusiasm and ownership. Students' audience focus shifted from "What will the lecturer think?" to "How will the public respond?" One student noted, "I didn't just learn about non-verbal communication – I saw how people reacted to it in real time."

The challenge of translating academic language into everyday terms improved students' audience awareness and clarity, with one reflecting, "The hardest part was making theory simple without making it wrong." As Ho and Lau (2025) observe, reflective practice fosters metacognitive growth and deeper learning. Students also developed unexpected soft skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving, particularly evident when groups faced unpredictable conditions, a benefit less common in classroom-bound assessments. Similar benefits have

been documented in applied learning contexts where students actively teach or demonstrate concepts (Björck & Willermark, 2024). Such outcomes also align with evidence that student-led public projects can strengthen employability skills while reinforcing disciplinary knowledge (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

Recruiting participants was generally successful but not without challenges. Many passers-by were willing to participate, yet some hesitated due to shyness, time constraints between classes, or uncertainty about the activity. Groups often had to adjust their approach, for example, simplifying explanations, relocating booths, or shortening activities to accommodate busy students. These interactions produced unexpected findings that complicated theoretical assumptions. In the listening-based projects, some participants performed better in noisy environments than predicted, attributing their focus to personal coping strategies rather than environmental cues. In the intercultural project, several students interpreted gestures accurately despite lacking prior exposure, suggesting that global media and hybrid cultural identities sometimes override traditional cultural schemas. Such variations reinforced for students that theories are useful guides but real-world behaviour is shaped by situational factors, individual differences, and contemporary media influences.

Challenges and Tips for Success

Three main challenges emerged: time management (some underestimated the lead time for securing venues or promoting events), resource constraints (limited access to materials occasionally affected delivery quality), and audience unpredictability (participation rates and engagement levels varied). As one student admitted, "We thought people would just show up, but it took more effort than expected." These challenges mirror those documented in other real-world learning projects, where unpredictability demands contingency planning and adaptive thinking (Björck & Willermark, 2024).

Based on these observations, several strategies are recommended. Setting milestones early ensures that projects do not stall due to late approvals or rushed execution. Providing resource guidance – such as a list of accessible tools, venues, and low-cost materials – can help maintain quality despite budget limitations. Incorporating contingency planning encourages students to anticipate potential setbacks, while modelling feedback collection helps them capture audience

impact systematically. Together, these measures can enhance the sustainability and replicability of such projects.

Why This Approach Works

Public engagement projects can make communication theory tangible and relevant, benefiting both student learning and the communities they serve. This assessment model encouraged students to become translators of theory, adapt to real-world challenges, and reflect critically on their practice. The approach is flexible: it can be implemented on a small scale in a classroom or expanded into larger, campus-wide activities. It works particularly well in communication courses but could be adapted to other disciplines where concepts need to be brought to life for non-specialist audiences. The logistical realities, such as variable noise levels, unpredictable participant responses, and the need to adapt activities on the spot, mirrored real communication conditions and strengthened the authenticity of the learning experience.

With careful planning and structured support, similar approaches can be adopted across communication curricula to foster deeper engagement, skill transfer, and authentic connections between the classroom and the wider world. Colleagues are encouraged to adapt, test, and share their own versions of this model so we can continue building a repertoire of strategies that bridge the gap between theory and public understanding.

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