



## Five Vital Signs

Last fall, my husband had some health issues requiring emergency medical attention. When we arrived at the emergency room, the nurses were interested in his symptoms, but they were especially interested in his vital signs. You know, things like body temperature, blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate. Why were they so interested in those? Because each one gives insight into how the body is functioning and acts as an important baseline for everything else that they're going to look into in the hospital.

Likewise, **the five skills in this resource are the vital signs that help us evaluate how our students are doing on the path to real-world success.** Business professionals and successful leaders continually cite that these vital skills as increasingly important for our students today to thrive in education, in careers, and in life.

When I founded the *Institute for Cultural Communicators*, or ICC, my team and I were on a mission to get the next generation — our own sons and daughters and students — ready for influence in the real world. We wanted (and still want) them to be able to make a positive difference in today's culture. And we started with speech, because we knew that in order to change culture, they needed to be able to talk about what they believed with confidence and compassion.

As we continued researching and refining our training over the past two and a half decades, it became clear that there are five competencies that propel any ordinary student to become an extraordinary leader. These five vital skills — **communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and cultural intelligence** — are what we'll dive into here. They are the vital signs for a student's success.

# Communication

*"The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public." -Mark Twain*



## **The Cement of Education**

When it comes to applying soft skills to education and life, communication is the **cement** — the ingredient that catalyzes all others to stick. It's the binder. It's the glue. It's the time-consuming, expensive component that makes all the rest of our labor worthwhile.

When I was in middle school, my dad went into the concrete and rock business. I spent afternoons and weekends calculating how much concrete farmers and DIY homeowners needed for their foundations, patios, sidewalks, and chicken houses.

Frequently, budget-conscious customers looked for ways to cut costs. Even in our modernized high-tech society, concrete is still made with four basic ingredients: rock, sand, water, and cement. The most expensive ingredient is the cement.

Many new-to-concrete-pouring homeowners skimped on the amount of cement in their mix. But the farmers rarely skimped. They knew better! Those who skimped were never, NEVER satisfied with their results.

Cement is the ingredient that binds all the rest of the concrete ingredients together. It's what makes it all "stick." Cement is what made Hoover Dam a modern architectural and engineering miracle.

Likewise, communication is what imparts real meaning and value to all of the subjects our students study. It's the conduit for "pouring" what they have learned into their lives and into the lives of others. It's the key to lasting transformation.

I love this analogy because there's nothing "soft" about it. Even though communication is often called a "soft" skill, it is in fact the cement that makes education durable — like concrete that will last, hold up in intense weather conditions, carry huge tractor-trailers and heavy traffic, and house the grill and patio furniture for memory-making moments with family and friends.

Just as concrete forms the foundation for homes and hotels, chicken ranches and chocolate factories, communication serves as the foundation your student can build his or her education and career success upon.

Warren Buffet was recently quoted advising a young entrepreneur: "The way to become worth 50 percent more this year than you were last year is to naturally invest in yourself. More specifically, hone your communication skills." He went on to address the importance of this skill:

***"You can have all the brainpower in the world,  
but you have to be able to transmit it.  
And the transmission is communication."***

## Defining Communication

I used to think communication just meant: I know stuff, I share it with others, now they know it as well. But that is not communication.

My favorite definition of communication comes from Webster's 1828 dictionary. Communication is "conferring for joint possession." This means it's not communication until we know if we're any closer to understanding each other than we were when we started.

There's so much to love about viewing communication this way. For starters, we know it's always a two-way process.

George Bernard Shaw said it this way:

***"The biggest myth about communication is the notion that it's actually happened."***

All of us have been guilty of believing we communicated something just because we said it out loud — but we never checked to see if what we said was received.

The CEO of Procter & Gamble, A.G. Lafley recently shared that **90 percent of his top-level job was trying to communicate.** That's the case for many business leaders who spend a lot of energy, time, and financial resources figuring out how to communicate in a way that gets people tuning in rather than tuning out.

I don't know about you, but I desperately want my children and my students to tune in. I want to equip them. I want to warn them. I want to prepare them. And I want them to be skilled in communication — something my own education did not prepare me for.



***“It isn’t the person with the great idea  
who changes the world  
but the one who can get their ideas across.”  
- Teresa Moon***

## **Where to Start**

I’m a big fan of public speaking as a starting place for training communication skills. There are many more applications that are needed — interpersonal communication, team communication, and digital communication, to name a few. I like beginning with public speaking because it’s a great training ground to get a foundation for any communication situation.

Most public speaking courses spend a lot of time helping already anxious students become even more anxious. By the time they actually give a speech, they’re nauseated, dizzy, and just want to get it over with. This is most unfortunate.

In the Institute for Cultural Communicators, we have trained tens of thousands of speakers of all ages. We view the platform as a privilege. It is always a privilege to share a message we believe in with a captive audience. (For example, it is a privilege to be sharing these ideas with you. You could be doing any number of things right now; yet, you chose to read this book.)

Our instructors and coaches — parents and educators just like you — lead students through a series of activities to familiarize them with several genres of public speaking. Students in our curriculum are usually speaking before they know that’s what they’re doing. Before they have too much time to get nervous. Public speaking is still an activity that tends to make people self-conscious, but with gentle feedback and a safe space to practice, it’s the most rewarding place to begin.

So, how does competence in communication impact a student’s opportunities in life? I’d like to take a peek into answering that question in Destini’s story.

## **Worth the Tears: Destini's Story**

Destini was a high school student in my public speaking class. It was an elective attended by a group of reluctant teens whose parents or teachers had registered them. We met in the living room of Destini's family home. The class was held after school hours, as that was the only time student schedules allowed for. Definitely not a featured selling point for teenagers.

We were several weeks into our class. It was time to begin standing to speak with limited preparation — a genre of speech where students are asked their perspective on a topic and only have a few minutes to think about what they are going to say. It's an important skill to develop for every area of life, such as sharing our perspectives in a small group, giving opinions on potty training or healthy eating, or responding to our boss who asks for insights on a recent training. But it's one activity that mortified Destini.

The first time Destini stood, she spoke for a few seconds. Then she began to cry. I'm not advocating this for every student, but I let her stand there for her remaining several minutes, asking questions to prompt her to think of new ideas to share. She just cried.

The following week, Destini spoke for almost a minute. Then she cried for the remainder of her time. These speaking-crying sessions went on for weeks. Meanwhile, her mom was around the corner in the hallway of her own home, on the floor crying. She couldn't imagine herself doing what she was requiring her daughter to do.

During the middle of every week, I received another phone call from Destini's mom. "Is it right for me to require her to do something so difficult?"

Each week I replied with the same question. "Do you want Destini to be your age and for it to be this difficult for her to share her ideas?"

And so it went. Week after week.

And Destini continued improving. Our last speaking-crying session was in October of the school year. The following April, Destini earned top honors at a statewide speech competition. She went on to compete at the national level. Which is thrilling, but not the point of this story.

Two years after that dreadful fall course, Destini applied for an honors internship in my organization. Interns travel the country — and now the world — teaching young communicators and leading emerging leaders. While she had improved dramatically and won several awards, I knew Destini was still self-conscious.

In our interview, I asked, “Destini, you know the role of an intern, right? You’ll be speaking a lot. To lots of audiences of all sizes, and to people of all ages. I remember how hard this was for you. Why would you want to do this?”

The 17-year-old Destini replied, “I want my peers to know they can do this too. These skills have made such a difference in my life. I want others to be freed from this anxiety and to see doors open for sharing important ideas.”

Destini is in her thirties today — a wife, mom, and a nursing instructor. Her mother recently shared this note from Destini with me:

*“Can you please pass this on to Dr. Moon? My boss hired me to train all the nurses in all the hospitals in our region. She said they selected me because of my communication skills. The hospital administration wants a good nurse and a really good communicator for the position. Please let Dr. Moon know that after all these years, her investment in that shy, reluctant, tearful student is still paying off. I’m so grateful she stuck with me.”*

Not every child is shy. Many have the gift of gab. But either way, training communication skills is essential. Good communication is freeing. It opens doors. It brings people together. And it’s the foundation for every other vital skill.



## Try this: Practice Communication with Pretzel Pictures

### Materials:

- Straight pretzels
  - Paper towels or mats to build pretzel pictures on
  - A way for partners to sit or stand back to back with their pretzel pictures.
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- Get into pairs and determine which partner is the Communicator and which partner is the Receiver.
  - The Communicator makes a picture with all her pretzels on the paper towel, which the Receiver cannot see. (1 min)
  - Once the Communicator has completed her picture, she explains to the Receiver — who is still not looking at it — how she made it. (2 min)
  - By following the Communicator's instructions, the Receiver tries to make a copy of the pretzel picture without looking at the original.
  - The Receiver may NOT ask questions or communicate with the Communicator at all. He simply listens to the instructions and makes the picture as best he can.
  - After two (2) minutes, the Communicator and Receiver compare pictures.

### Repeat the activity, only this time:

- The Receiver is the Communicator.
- The new Receiver may ask for clarification or more direction. This is an open dialogue between each pair.

### Debrief the activity:

- Ask participants to share observations. Here are a few questions to get you started:
  - What did you notice as the Communicator?
  - What are some things you noticed as the Receiver?
  - What did you do differently when you switched roles?
- Participants often note:
  - Simple pictures are easier to communicate than to receive and replicate.
  - Two-way communication makes all the difference.
  - Clear instructions are easy to follow and hard to give.
- Your participants will offer helpful insights. Invite them to share the connections they see between this activity and real-life communication situations they can recall or envision.