How to miscommunicate with your student/advisor

Toshiya Hachisuka
University of Waterloo

Originally presented at Tomatograph 2021

What? I don't want to do that!

- ☐ **Yes, I know.** That's **why** we should talk about it!

- ☐ I will show several examples of miscommunication in academia.

  - ☐ A conversion followed by diagnosis of what went wrong and how to fix it.

  - ☐ Assume that students and advisors are both trying to be good.

  - ☐ Hope to spark conversation among you to avoid future miscommunication!

  Disclaimer: I myself am probably guilty of such miscommunication.

Research meetings

"I didn't do that"

Advisor: Have you made suggested changes to the paper?

Student: No, I didn't do that because I didn't feel like they make sense.

Advisor: Why did you ignore my suggestions?

Advisor & **Student**: ... (both look frustrated)

"I didn't do that" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

Why is my student ignoring suggestions? My student is not listening to me.
I'm frustrated.

Student:

I've tried thinking critically. My advisor does not respect my opinion.
I'm frustrated.

"I didn't do that" — Diagnosis

- ☐ It's great when students think critically, but here's a catch:

  - ☐ Advisors are human beings (!) and human beings generally hate being ignored.

  - ☐ Dismissing suggestions doesn't mean thinking critically.

- ☐ Be honest but respect opinions. It's applicable to both students and advisors!

  - ☐ Do not ignore suggestions — tell what you think and why, if you disagree.

  - ☐ Generally listen to suggestions otherwise. They are keys for improvement!

"I didn't do that" — Better example

Advisor: Have you made suggested changes to the paper?

Student: Yes, I tried, but I think that the original draft reads better in my opinion. Here is the comparison with the prior version. You can check if it makes sense.

Advisor: Let me see... I think you are totally right. Maybe my suggestion was a bit off, so let's revert it back to the prior version.

"What should I do then?"

Student: This is a graph of X. Here is another one. It looks like they are related probably because Y is true as you said last time.

Advisor: Yes, I agree that it perhaps shows that Y is true.

Student: Sure. What should I do then?

Advisor: You'll need to think about it by yourself.

Student: …

"What should I do then?" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

My student is just following what I say and not taking an ownership of research.

Student:

I have rough ideas, but I am really not sure whether they are making any sense.
I would like my advisor to guide me, but s/he is not doing it.

"What should I do then?" — Diagnosis

- ☐ Advisors would like to **advise**, but not to the extent that taking ownership away.

- ☐ At the beginning, students are **not familiar** with the idea of exploring unknowns.

- ☐ Tell what you think you should do, even if you think it is naive or half-baked.

    - ☐ It's also your training to think what to do next.

    - ☐ Don't blindly follow what your advisor told you (but don't ignore what they say!).

"What should I do then?" — Better example

Student: This is the graph of X. Here is another one. It looks like they are related because of Y.

Advisor: I see. I also think it perhaps shows that Y is true.

Student: I agree. Maybe it's a bad idea, but to confirm it, I thought about doing Z. What do you think?

Advisor: That's actually a very good idea. Just keep in mind that Z assumes…

Student: Thanks! I'll work on it next week.

"Same as last time"

Student: I've implemented the method A this week and here's the result.

Advisor: OK… Can you try doing it with the method B?

Student: You told me not to use the method B last time! Did you forget?

Advisor: Please calm down…

"Same as last time" — Miscommunication

Advisor: It is either;

1. Another idea was dismissed last time, but I think it is now worth trying.

2. I forgot what we discussed and I thought that this suggestion is new.

Student:

My advisor forgot what was discussed and doesn't care. How dare you!

"Same as last time" — Diagnosis

- ☐ Be aware of asymmetry of information!

  - ☐ For a student, it can be the only project for her/him, but for an advisor, it is likely be one of many projects, so your advisor likely forgets the details.

- ☐ Remind your advisor what you have discussed so far.

  - ☐ Don't be mad if they forgot — they still do care about your project.

  - ☐ Take notes. If something seems forgotten, check it with your advisor.

"Same as last time" — Better example

Student: According to my notes, last time, we've discussed whether we should use the method A or the method B, and we concluded that I'll try the method A . I've implemented the method A this week and here's the result.

Advisor: Great. I knew it was dismissed last time, but now that I see your result, it looks like the method B is worth trying.

Student: Oh, that's interesting. Why do you think that's the case?

Advisor: Well, it's because….

"I disagree with you"

Student: Here's the results we talked last time, and I think does X.

Advisor: Let me see… Hmm… I think it might be actually doing Y, not X.

Student: I disagree with you. It is doing X.

Advisor: OK…

"I disagree with you" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

I am trying to provide a different view to make things more solid/better, but the student does not listen to me.

Student:

My advisor does not understand how what I said is correct.

"I disagree with you" — Diagnosis

☐ Remember this mentality: "I agree to disagree" and "I understand but I disagree".

    ☐ Your advisor needs to understand why you disagree based on facts.

☐ Communicate why you disagree and find out the source of disagreement.

    ☐ Again, don't be mad if other people don't agree with you.

    ☐ Disagreement is not because they don't like you or they are not trying to understand your reasonings - most likely it is the complete opposite!

"I disagree with you" — Better example

Student: Here's the results we talked last time, and I think does X.

Advisor: Let me see… Hmm… I think it might be actually doing Y, not X.

Student: I disagree with you because my understanding is that these numbers show certain properties that it is doing X than Y. Can you explain to me why you think it is doing Y so that we are on the same page?

Advisor: Sure! It is because this part of results shows that Y is…

Submitting papers

"Publishing hidden results"

Student: (I came up with an interesting idea by my own, and it's working well already.)

Advisor: Hi! How's the progress of our paper?

Student: It's not going anywhere… I would like to aim for another conference.

Advisor: Oh, OK. I guess that's reasonable. Let's aim for the best next time!

Student: (Maybe I'll submit my own paper instead, now that I have some time.)

Advisor: (… after the student's paper is published) What's going on?

RESEARCH

"Publishing hidden results" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

My student is not taking our project seriously, and it looks like s/he just would like to work on her/his own. Maybe I don't supervise her/him anymore!

Student:

I came up with an idea by my own, wrote a paper alone, and submitted it. What's wrong?

"Publishing hidden results" — Diagnosis

☐ **In general, if you are the sole author, you are entitled to do whatever you want.**

    ☐ **However, it is often difficult to separate you own work from work you do with your advisor, if you are talking about research in the same field.**

    ☐ **Related, but a different problematic case is submitting your own work with your advisor added without any consensus.**

☐ **It's better to communicate what you have and what you want all the time**

    ☐ **In fact, your advisor is likely to support you!**

"Publishing hidden results" — Better example

Student: (I came up with an interesting idea by my own, and it's working well already.)

Advisor: Hi! How's the progress of our paper?

Student: It's not going anywhere… I would like to aim for another conference. By the way, I am sure you knew it, but my personal project on XXX has been going well. I wonder if I can submit it instead.

Advisor: Oh, that project you mentioned? It's actually impressive that you could do it! Anything I can help? You of course should be the sole author since you did it alone.

Student: Thank you! I appreciate if you can briefly comment on the draft.

"I worked on it"

Advisor: How was your internship?

Student: It was great. I worked on a topic A and we submitted a paper on it with some researchers in the company.

Advisor: What? That's a topic we worked on while ago! I should be involved!

Student: Sorry… We already submitted a paper…

"I worked on it" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

My student took an idea we developed together, excluded me, and submitted a paper! I cannot believe it.

Student:

I built upon the knowledge I learned in my research during my internship.
Why is my advisor mad at me?

"I worked on it" — Diagnosis

- ☐ Similar to the previous example; it's not easy to separate what's done with their advisor from external work, if they are related to research.

- ☐ Bidirectional communication is the key here.

  - ☐ Advisors should tell students up front that they want to get involved/notified when topics are related to students' research projects.

  - ☐ Students should talk to advisors when your external work is related (even remotely) to research at a graduate program.

"I worked on it" — Better example

Advisor: How was your internship?

Student: It was great. I worked on a topic A, and we submitted a paper on it with some researchers in the company.

Advisor: I see. You told me that you are woking on it some months ago, and we agreed that I won't be involved since it's quite far from my expertise. I hope it's accepted!

Student: Thanks! I hope so, too.

Presenting your work

"I don't get it"

Student: … and this is the result I have and here is what I think.

Advisor: I don't get it at all.

Student: sigh…

"I don't get it" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

I don't understand some parts, and thus I don't think I can say that I get the conclusion. I hope that the student can explain it to me.

Student:

Is my advisor even listening? I have no idea what is wrong with it.

"I don't get it" — Diagnosis

- ☐ Your advisor is trying to understand your work in detail, so s/he may (accidentally) say, "I don't get it at all" even if s/he understands some.

- ☐ "I don't get it" means "Please explain more", not "Your work is garbage."

- ☐ Advisors can follow up by clarifying what they don't understand.

  - ☐ By saying "I don't get it", you are responsible to explain why.

  - ☐ Don't say "I don't get it at all", unless you really mean it.

"I don't get it" — Better example

Student: … and this is the result I have and here is what I think.

Advisor: I'm sorry but I don't get your conclusion yet. I think my problem is that I don't understand the part X. Perhaps you can go back to the part X, and let me ask some questions there to understand it better.

Student: Sure!

"Lots of suggestions"

Student: … and that's all for my practice talk.

Advisor: It was good overall, but I have suggestions. I think your first slide should… then I wonder… How about… Did it work… How did you… What are those… What if you change…

Student: Thanks for your suggestions…

Advisor: (?)

"Lots of suggestions" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

I've done a good job giving very thorough feedback.

Student:

My work was completely trashed.

"Lots of suggestions" — Diagnosis

- ☐ Advisors are used to constructive criticisms, but students are not (yet).

    - ☐ For students, a barrage of comments can be seen as an act of trashing students' work, especially for hard-working students.

- ☐ Remember that criticisms and suggestions are meant to improve your work

    - ☐ Advisors can clarify this aspect time to time, even though it is obvious to them.

    - ☐ Negative feedback can be sandwiched with positive feedback, if you want.

"Lots of suggestions" — Better example

Student: … and that's all for my practice talk.

Advisor: I liked the way you explain the concept A, but this part was not clear to me. I still liked the overall story though. I'll make a lot of suggestions from now on, but keep in mind that they are meant to improve your talk, not to trash it.

Student: I got it. Let me take a note to make changes later.

Advisor: Excellent. Let's get started.

"I didn't mean it"

Student: ... and that's all for my practice talk.

Advisor: Can you go to the slide 9? I think this slide is misleading, and you can change it this way.

Student: But I didn't mean it. Here is what I meant (writing down something).

Advisor: ... (seemingly annoyed)

"I didn't mean it" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

The slide is misleading and needs to be changed, but my student is not listening.

Student:

My advisor misunderstood the slide. I gotta explain what it actually is.

"I didn't mean it" — Diagnosis

☐ Your advisor might already get what you meant, and is just pointing out that your slide is not communicating what your true message is.

☐ It's tempting to argue against suggestions in your practice talk, but don't do that!

    ☐ You will sound like as if you don't want to listen (even if you actually do).

☐ Instead, understand why you got those suggestions and seek for advices.

    ☐ Same goes for writing. Take suggestions as opportunities for improvement.

"I didn't mean it" — Better example

Student: … and that's all for my practice talk.

Advisor: Can you go to the slide 9? I think this slide is misleading, and you can change it this way.

Student: I see. What I wanted to say here is actually this message. What do you think needs to be changed so that I can tell this message clearly?

Advisor: Let me think… maybe you can change this part to that?

Student: That seems much better. I'll make changes later.

Other likely scenarios

"I'll be away"

Student: By the way, about the paper deadline in a month, I'll be away around the deadline, so I'm not sure if I can submit a paper.

Advisor: Oh, I'm not sure if that's a good idea…

Student: I'm sorry but I've booked my flight and I cannot change the schedule.

Advisor: I guess it cannot be helped then. Have fun! (oh my…)

"I'll be away" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

Unbelievable! My student doesn't care about research at all.

Student:

Unbelievable! Is my advisor suggesting that I should forget about my life and work on research 24/7?

"I'll be away" — Diagnosis

- ☐ **In general, advisors take paper deadlines more seriously than students**

  - ☐ **They don't understand the idea of taking a vacation before the deadline (or do they?)**

  - ☐ **Joking aside, your advisor expects that students act professionally**

- ☐ **Good rule to follow might be "Work hard and play hard"**

  - ☐ **Be planned and manage your own schedule**

  - ☐ **I am not saying that you shouldn't take days off. Actually, you should!**

"I'll be away" — Better example

Student: By the way, about the paper deadline in a month, I'll be away around the deadline, so I'm not sure if I can submit a paper.

Advisor: Oh, I'm not sure if that's a good idea…

Student: I know it's very bad timing, but I unfortunately cannot change the schedule. I hope you can help me revise the plan until the deadline.

Advisor: Alright. Let's see if you can wrap up the paper before you leave!

"It didn't work"

Advisor: Have you tried the algorithm I suggested last time?

Student: Yes I've done, and it didn't work.

Advisor: Oh, it didn't. So?

Student: (?) Like I said, it just didn't work.

Advisor & **Student**: … (both look puzzled)

"It didn't work" — Miscommunication

Advisor:

My student is not thinking thoroughly enough.

Student:

I have done what was suggested and reported it back as a failure. What's wrong?

"It didn't work" — Diagnosis

- [ ] Advisors, as experienced researchers, would not simply say, "it didn't work", but would try understanding **why** it didn't work.

- [ ] Students may think that it is a waste of time to **report a failure.**

- [ ] You need to tell everything to your advisor

    - [ ] How it didn't work and what was tried exactly are important

    - [ ] Your advisor can give you more advices if you tell more information

"It didn't work" — Better example

Advisor: Have you tried the algorithm I suggested last time?

Student: Yes. I implemented the algorithm you suggested using the method A. I've spent a lot of time trying to make it work, but I wasn't able to as I'll explain later. Here are the results. Because of the reason B and … (reasoning), I think it's not working. I believe it's consistent with what we speculated last time.

Advisor: I see. I agree with your observation. I wonder if you change this part? The method A is known to have the issues when… Maybe this part of the algorithm is fine based on this result, so let's change another part.

What's your example?

Advisor:

Student:

Talk with your advisor/students about what went or can go wrong!

Summary

Summary

- [ ] Miscommunication **can happen**, even if students and advisors are good people.

  - [ ] It can lead to **unfortunate** disputes between students and advisors.

  - [ ] Don't get **emotional**. Everyone is trying to **do something good for you**.

- [ ] Simple rule is to be **open and honest (but not emotional)** about what you think.

  - [ ] Speak up everything you think and have, **even though they are obvious to you**.

  - [ ] Doing so can also be **a solution** for miscommunication that already happened.