**Small Talk Assignment**

**Purpose:** “Small Talk” is more than just passing time with a stranger or colleague; it is the entry point for a wide variety of future academic and professional relationships – work colleagues, collaborators, friends, and advisors. Finding opportunities to practice small talk and reflecting on the experience will help you in navigating and improving this crucial skill.

**Instructions:** Over the next week, look for opportunities to participate in two small talk interactions. As a reminder, small talk is “unimportant conversations about uncontroversial topics.” After your experience, take notes on your interaction using the information and questions below. Submit your findings in this document by the due date on Canvas. Whenever possible, try to record exact phrases to help reinforce or learn new language that you can use. This experience is based on *your* participation in a small talk, so if there are more than two people involved, ensure you are commenting on an experience where you were a participant, not just an observer.

*Possible locations:* at the bus stop, right before class begins, lunch with a classmate, in the office, in the library, student club activities, at the gym/at a sports game, before a department meeting

**Small Talk #1**

*Setting*

Date: Sep.4th, 2025

Location: the lobby of Hock plaza

Time: about 8:15 a.m.

1. Participants: besides yourself, who were the participants in this interaction, and what is your relation to them?

I was speaking with a classmate from my BIOSTAT 701 course. We had exchanged a few ideas about the homework before, but didn’t know well each other.

2. Greetings: what was said to start the interaction? Try to be specific!

I saw her walking ahead of me and caught up to her. I start the conversation by saying, “Morning, Stella! Heading to biostats?” She turned, smiled and said, ”Oh, hey! Yep, just trying to get there on time.”

3. What topics were discussed? How did the topic change? Did you initiate the change in topic? If you can remember any language or phrasing that was used, write it down as best as you remember it.

*Topic 1:*

Coursework. The conversation started with the Biostat 701 course.

Stella asked me, “Did you finish the assignment due today for this course? I thought the last question was pretty challenging.”

I answered, “Yeah. The last question is related to the R coding, maybe you can go over the R manuscript, It can help you or we can discuss more after the class.”

She answered, “It’s nice of you! My undergraduate major is materials science. And I’m lacking in coding knowledge base.”

*Move to the next topic:*

I answered, “Cool! Take it easy. There are many connections between different coding languages. I believe you can handle them well. By the way, I’m an interdisciplinary learner too. Maybe that’s what this program director prefers (laugh).”

4. Pre-Closing and Closing: What was the pre-closing strategy (i.e. how did you know the conversation was about to end)? How did the small talk exchange close? Did small talk lead into a larger and more substantial discussion after the small talk ended?

Pre-closing: The physical setting provided the pre-closing cue. We were approaching our classroom, which naturally marked the end of our walk-and-walk.

Closing:

I had a look at the time and said,” Good! It seems we successfully arrived at the classroom on time!”

She nodded and said, “ Perfect! And I’ve gotten a nice chat with you. It’s a good beginning of today!”

I replied, “You too! Have a wonderful day!” The conversation ended as we choose the different seats in the classroom.

Yes, the small talk leads into a more personal discussion about our undergraduate major and a possibility for the discussion on the assignment.

5. What did you do specifically that you are pleased with?

When she mentioned the problem encountered in the assignment, I informed her the R manuscript, and let her know I’m glad to help her. It can create an opportunity for us to discuss the problem as well as have a connection again, which I think is helpful for build further relationship between classmates.

6. Were there any awkward moments or miscommunication? What do you think caused this?

There were no significant awkward moments. I did feel a brief moment of hesitation before I started the conversation with her. However, based on the GS721 lesson, I think I had learnt how to begin a small talk and maybe I can handle it well. So, I told myself,” Just do it!” Eventually, I think the conversation began and ended successfully.

**Small Talk #2**

*Setting*

Date: Sep.8th, 2025

Location: The university cafeteria

Time: 2:30p.m.

1. Participants: besides yourself, who were the participants in this interaction?

The supervising professor for a research project. We have a formal academic relationship, but this was our first informal conversation outside of a scheduled meeting.

2. Greetings: what was said to start the interaction? Try to be specific!

We ran into each other near the food court. She recognized me and started the conversation by saying,” Oh! Ashley? Nice to see you here!” I responded, “Professor, hello! Yes, I’m here to have a drink and take a rest.”

3. What topics were discussed? How did the topic change? Did you initiate the change in topic? If you can remember any language or phrasing that was used, write it down as best as you remember it.

Topic 1:

She noticed the camera I was holding and initiated the first topic. She asked,” Is that a camera? Are you working on a photography projects?”

I replied,” Oh, this is for shooting video. It can help the video have a better quality.”, which prompted her to look closer.

She said,” It looks very professional. What kind is it?”

I responded,” It’s from a brand called DJI, a Chinese company. They make great equipment that is very high value for the price. They also have many different kinds of cameras, which you can find on their official website.”

She responded,” Oh, that’s great! I’ll have a look at their website.”

After discussing the camera, I decided to transition the topic to what I was using for. I said,” I was just using it to interview my oral English professor.”

Topic 2:

This statement naturally led my professor to ask, “How interesting. What was the interview about?” I then explained the larger project, saying, “I’m representing the Duke Chinese Students and Scholars Association, and we’re creating short video interviews with professors. The goal is to edit them and post them on Chinese social media to introduce faculty to prospective students.”

She said, “What a fantastic idea.”

4. Pre-Closing and Closing: What was the pre-closing strategy (i.e. how did you know the conversation was about to end)? What was the closing? Did small talk lead into a larger and more substantial discussion after the small talk ended? If so, how did you know there was a transition from small talk to a different style of communication?

Pre-closing:

Her positive reaction led me to extend an invitation. I said,” If it’s possible, would you like to join us?”

She said,” Of course! I’m glad to do this!”

After she agreed, the pre-closing was,” Thanks for your support! I’ll send you an e-mail later with the details, and we can schedule for the interview.”

Closing:

She said,” That sounds great! I’m looking forward to your e-mail! Enjoy your sweety drinks here! Bye-bye!”

I replied,” Byebye, professor! Have a nice day!”

Yes, the small talk directly led into a more substantial discussion. It transitioned from a simple chance encounter into a professional collaboration.

The transition happened when my professor expressed genuine interest in the project, saying it was a "fantastic idea." At that moment, I realized the conversation had moved beyond simple curiosity (small talk) and into a topic of professional interest. My communication style then shifted from simply answering questions to actively proposing a collaboration (inviting her to be interviewed), which is a more goal-oriented form of communication.

5. What did you do specifically that you are pleased with?

I am pleased that I clearly and concisely explained my project when asked. I am also proud that I seized the opportunity when my professor showed interest and had the confidence to invite her to participate, turning a casual chat into a tangible outcome for my project.

6. Were there any awkward moments or miscommunication? What do you think caused this?

Yes, there was a slightly awkward moment. After I explained the project, she was quiet for a few seconds, and I got nervous. I was worried that maybe I said too much or that she didn't like the idea. I think the pause just happened because she was taking a moment to think about what I said. My own nervousness made me misinterpret her silence as a bad sign, but she was probably just thinking it through. The awkward feeling disappeared as soon as she smiled and said she was interested.

7. Based on your previous small talk interaction, did you try anything different? If not, what would you like to try differently or improve upon for future small talk situations?

Yes. In other small talk situations, I have tended to stick to very safe, generic topics. This time, when a subject I was passionate and knowledgeable about came up, I didn't downplay it. I spoke about it in detail, which made the conversation more engaging. This experience showed me that sharing genuine interests, when appropriate, can lead to much more meaningful and productive conversations than simply talking about the weather.

**Grade**

All requested information is provided and includes sufficient detail 10/**10**

Analysis question(s) are thoughtfully answered 5/**5**

**TOTAL** 15/**15** 100% (A)