

Wire Tap

Students explore how information changes depending on who carries it and who is allowed to hear it. Through a series of short message-passing games with changing rules, learners experience trust, mistakes, and intentional interference firsthand. Reflection focuses on how messages can change, leak, or be protected, and who should decide who gets access to information.

ACTIVITY TYPE Simulation · Discussion · Experiential learning	DURATION 40–50 min	PARTICIPATION Whole class · Small groups
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OBJECTIVES

By the end of this activity, learners will:

- Experience how information can change when passed between people
- Recognize the difference between mistakes and intentional changes
- Understand that not everyone should hear every message
- Begin thinking critically about trust, privacy, and control of information

MATERIALS

- Prepared short and long message cards (for teacher reference) (See Appendix A) — [A · Example simple and complex messages](#)
- Paper and pencil for running dictation variant
- Simple symbol or substitution code sheet for optional locked message (See Appendix B) — [B · Simple symbol code \(nice to have\)](#)
- Open classroom space for movement
- Whiteboard or poster board for reflection notes
- Timer (*nice to have*)

PROCEDURE

OPENING

1. Prepare simple and complex messages in advance.
2. Decide team groupings of 6–8 students.
3. Clear space so students can line up or move safely.

PRE-ACTIVITY

5 minutes

1. Ask students if they have ever played telephone.
2. Ask whether the message always stays the same.
3. Explain that today they will test who can be trusted with a message.
4. Avoid introducing technical or abstract terms.

Objective In Student's Words

- “See what happens to a message when different people carry it.”

ACTIVITY

30-35 minutes

Setup

1. Divide the class into small teams.
2. Explain that each team will run several short rounds with the same structure but different rules.
3. Emphasize that no one is in trouble for mistakes.

Model

1. Demonstrate whispering rules using a very short example.
2. Reinforce rules clearly: whisper only, no repeating, no fixing mistakes.

Carry Out

Round 1 – Easy Message (Trusted Chain)

1. Whisper a very simple sentence to the first student.
2. Students pass the message by whispering down the line.
3. The last student says the message out loud.
4. Checkpoint: Was the message correct, did anyone change it on purpose, did it feel easy to trust the group?

Round 2 – Hard Message (Complex Information)

1. Use the same setup with a longer, more precise sentence.
2. Run the whisper chain again.
3. The last student says the message out loud.
4. Checkpoint: What changed, where did it break, was anyone being bad or was it just hard?

Round 3 – Hidden Rule (Intentional Change)

1. Use the same complex message.
2. Secretly tell one student in the middle they may change one word.
3. Do not announce that this rule exists.
4. Run the whisper chain.
5. Checkpoint: Did this feel different from mistakes, how could we tell something was wrong, what felt unfair?

Optional Variant – Running Dictation (Control vs Trust)

Round 4 – Trusted Runner

1. Place the message written on paper across the room.
2. One student runs to read it and returns to tell the writer.
3. The writer records the message.
4. Checkpoint: Was this clearer than whispering and why?

Round 5 – Untrusted Space

1. Add a listener near the runner's path.
2. The listener may hear but must not see the message.
3. Checkpoint: Who learned something they shouldn't have and was the message still safe?

Optional Final Twist – Locked Message

1. Repeat running dictation with the message written in a simple symbol code (*See Appendix B*).
2. Ask students to observe who can understand it.
3. Checkpoint: Who can read it and who hears it but learns nothing?

Reflection

1. Ask who should hear everything.
2. Ask who should hear nothing.
3. Ask who should decide.
4. Allow students to name the problem in their own words.

FOLLOW-UP

5-10 minutes

1. Review that messages can change, leak, or be altered.
2. Reinforce that trust depends on rules and boundaries.
3. Connect to earlier lessons on public versus private information.

CLOSE

5 minutes

1. Thank students for participating honestly.
2. Reset the classroom layout.
3. Final message to students: Being careful with information helps protect people.

NOTES

Classroom management

- Normalize mistakes and emotional reactions while maintaining calm control.
- Do not accuse or reveal the hidden rule-breaker unless students explicitly ask.

Extensions & Sponge Activities

- Write a class rule for protecting messages or redesign the game to make it fairer.

Differentiation

- Younger students: shorter messages and fewer rounds.
- ELL/Accessibility: visual cues, slower pacing, buddy support.
- Safety: controlled movement and clear whispering rules.