An Introduction to Communication in the Classroom

The Role of Communication in Teaching and Training

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Getting Started

A sizable portion of a teacher's total communication experience in a given day is initiated by someone else—students, other teachers, supervisors, parents, and so on. Frequently, we have little choice about whether or not to communicate. Someone comes into our classroom and asks us a question. We are mandated to communicate in return, even if all we do is turn away and say nothing. Such a refusal to engage in verbal communication will certainly communicate, and in a very negative way! As we noted in the previous chapter, we cannot *not* communicate in such circumstances. Nevertheless, we do exert considerable control over the extent to which we communicate. In some instances we may choose to initiate communication, and in other instances we may choose not to. Our concern here is why we choose to in some cases and not in others.

Communication Motivations

Our perception of our communication choices is normally based on our projection of the probable outcomes of communicating or not communicating in the given instance. If we predict the outcome will be to our advantage, we will probably choose to communicate. If our projection is negative, of course, we will probably try to avoid communication. The outcomes with which teachers are most likely to be concerned include developing and maintaining affinity, acquiring information or understanding, influencing others, reaching decisions, confirming beliefs, and expressing feelings. Although it may come as a surprise to some, the outcomes of primary concern to students are the same as those of concern to teachers.
Developing and Maintaining Affinity

"Affinity" is liking, being attracted to, or wanting to be near some other person. Gaining affinity from another person, or maintaining such affinity, is often a desired outcome of communication. Most people have a need for warm relationships with other people. We do not want to be rejected or become isolated from other human beings. Although there are some exceptions, the overwhelming majority of both teachers and students have a very high desire to gain affinity from each other. It may be that some teachers do not care if their students like them or not, but most know that their lives will be much more pleasant if their students have a high regard for them. Similarly, while it may be “cool” for students to tell other students they don’t care what teachers think of them, most know that if the teacher likes them, their world will be a much more pleasant place.

These general predispositions may be the norm, but it is important to recognize that there is considerable variability among both teachers and students. Thus, although much of both teachers’ and students’ initiation of communication comes as a result of a desire to gain affinity with others, some have a stronger desire to do so, and some have a much weaker desire.

Students who have a very high need for affinity often strive to become the “teacher’s pet.” They sometimes try too hard to please, are agreeable to almost anything the teacher wants, and may always seem to be underfoot. Such behavior is usually observed and recognized by other students before it is recognized by the teacher, since positive attention is desired by most teachers, and it is nice to think it is deserved. Similarly, teachers with an unusually high need for affinity go out of their way to be nice to their students and avoid doing things that might put themselves in a less positive light. For instance, they might avoid assigning homework, dole out few tests, assign high grades, excuse inappropriate behavior, and so on. These teacher behaviors are likely to be noticed first by other teachers or by supervisors than by students. Sometimes the teacher is not even aware he or she is engaging in these unprofessional behaviors. Of course, the supervisor may not notice what is going on because the teacher is also actively “kissing up” to her or him.

Students and teachers at the other end of this continuum can create problems, too. Students with a low need for affinity may simply avoid opportunities for communication with peers and teachers. This may cause them to be seen as loners or simply ignored. Some low-affinity students may actively express a dislike for their teachers and peers. Expressions of “negative affinity” may lead to serious conflicts, as most people don’t respond well to such behavior.

Teachers with an unusually low need for affinity may be a very disruptive force in a school. They may behave very much as students do who have similar needs. If they simply withdraw, they may be seen by other teachers as not collegial and as not carrying their share of the load. Students are likely to see them as hostile and uncaring. These perceptions often affect the class and the subject matter the teacher is covering and, as a result, have a very negative impact on the student’s affective learning.

It has been estimated that between 50 and 90 percent of all interpersonal communication occurs primarily because of the participants’ motivation to seek affinity with one another (McCroskey & Wheless, 1976). Although acquiring information
or understanding is presumed to be the primary communication objective in an instructional context, when we look at the entire school context, it is probable that this estimate of the proportion of communication motivated by affinity is accurate in the instructional context as well. Even when other outcomes may be desired in a communication relationship, seldom is affinity completely irrelevant. Even the principal wants to be loved!

**Acquiring Information or Understanding**

School is about information and understanding. Teachers have it, and students want it. Although both of these statements are very idealistic and not very realistic, they are assumptions we generally accept as the foundation of the school environment. Information—acquiring it and dispensing it—is our business. Indeed, most people, both children and adults, want to learn. If the circumstances are right, they will even go out of their way to initiate communication to do so.

The need for information and understanding is a common motivation for communication. Students may attend class and/or read textbooks because they feel a need for information or understanding. Teachers initiate communication with students so they can better understand those students and be better able to facilitate their learning.

**Influencing Others**

As human beings, we can control some aspects of our world directly by our own behavioral choices. We may, for example, grow some of our own food. For the most part, however, we must have the cooperation of others if we are to prosper and have much control within our environment. To gain that cooperation, we need to influence others, just as others need to influence us to gain our cooperation. Influence, like cooperation, is a two-way street.

Teachers and students feel the need to influence each other, as well as their own peers. It has been said that there are two ways to influence others: to coerce them or to persuade them. The first option is dependent on the use or threat of force. The second is dependent on communication. Most would agree that persuasion is the preferred method in an instructional environment, although the alternative method is sometimes employed.

The idealist may believe that students are always motivated to learn, but the realist recognizes that teachers need to encourage that motivation in many cases. At the university level, it may be enough to simply present information and let students decide whether to learn it or ignore it, but it is certainly not enough at earlier levels of instruction. Even at the university level, teachers who are recognized as excellent are almost always the ones who influence their students to want to learn from them. Teachers at the elementary and secondary levels are destined to be failures if they ignore the need to influence their students’ behaviors.

Although we noted earlier that most people think school is about information, that really is not the case. Societies do not tax their people to create schools just to
disseminate information. Schools are designed to perpetuate the culture of the people who support them. This is done by influencing the beliefs, attitudes, values, and (most important) the behaviors of the students—not just while they are in school but also long after their schooling is completed. Thus, from a community perspective, the role of the teacher is primarily to be an influence agent. Much of the communication initiated by teachers is specifically directed toward influencing the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of their students.

Reaching Decisions

Although decision making is a major reason for communication in many environments, it is not a particularly significant factor in the classroom. It’s true that teachers must communicate with other teachers and supervisors to make many instructional decisions, and students need to communicate with others to make many of the decisions in their lives, but teachers and students in a classroom setting do not normally engage in much communication directed toward reaching decisions. Where this occurs, it is usually in specialized instructional contexts that involve a lot of individualized attention.

Confirming Beliefs

After we make a decision or draw a conclusion, it is common to talk to others to confirm we have decided wisely. When we choose from a variety of alternatives, particularly when there seem to be several good options, we are often disturbed by having had to reject one alternative to accept another. Consider having to decide whether to take a position that would provide a substantial increase in salary or to take one that would provide more free time to be with family.

Whichever option is chosen, it is likely that the road not taken will continue to be attractive, maybe even more so than before we made the decision. This kind of psychological stress is sometimes known as “dissonance.” To reduce it, we often communicate with other people to confirm that they would have made the same choice we did had they been in our place, or to gain information that will make our choice seem more desirable and the alternative choices less desirable. We often see this type of behavior in students who have elective choices for classes to take. It is very important to them to feel that they have chosen the right courses. They may be overheard praising a class they chose to take, but at the same time, they may be condemning a required course, since they have no emotional stake in that class. Teachers will behave similarly, only the choices are different.

Expressing Feelings

In Chapter 1, we distinguished between expressive and other types of communication. As we noted, expressive communication arises from the feelings or emotions of the individual. This type of communication is personality driven. Another person with the same feelings might not express them at all. Some people have a very
high need to express whatever they feel. Others are very private. No matter what they might be feeling, those around them are unlikely to know about it.

Both students and teachers may initiate communication to express their feelings, but it is more common for students to do this than for teachers. Small children often exude the need to express themselves. They may not even care whether anyone else hears them at all. They will express their feelings even if no one else is present. As we grow older, most of us learn that we need to control the external expressions of our feelings and emotions. However, that does not necessarily reduce our desire to express them. Part of having a close relationship with another person is knowing that we can convey our feelings to that person without being judged. Acknowledgment is often the only response required.

Because many students do not have such close relationships, it is not unusual for them to try to develop a substitute relationship with a teacher. When this happens, it is important for the teacher to be accepting of the student so that he or she can vent built-up feelings. Teachers should also recognize that there's no need to judge or respond to those expressive messages beyond acknowledging that they have been heard.

When teachers regularly find it necessary to express their emotions and feelings to a class full of students, it may create a serious problem. Mature adults are expected to find a more appropriate outlet for communicating their feelings. Students are unlikely to know how to respond. They may question the stability and/or motives of the teacher. Some may want to stay away from that teacher because they think he or she is "weird." Teachers must control the expression of their feelings in their classrooms.

**Choice of Communication Partners**

As we have noted, there are a variety of reasons why people choose to communicate. Usually, communication is designed to meet the individual needs of the person initiating the communication. We turn our attention now to why someone chooses a particular person with whom to initiate communication. Such choices are far from random. We will consider five reasons here.

**Proximity**

Before we start looking for more surprising reasons why people choose certain others with whom to communicate, we certainly should consider the obvious, although when people are asked to come up with reasons why they talk to certain people and not to others, this "obvious" explanation often is not mentioned. People communicate most with people who are around them most.

If you can recover from the shock of this revelation, let us continue; actual research has been conducted in this area, and the results are interesting. After four years of studying 25,000 pairs of college students, Priest and Sawyer (1967) concluded that such communicative pairs are most likely to form in order of increasing
proximity. That is, college roommates were the most likely to pair, then students living in different rooms on the same floor, then students on different floors of the same building, and then students living in different buildings.

Think of the person with whom you talk most every day. It might be your spouse, your child, or one of your parents. It also might be a teacher in the classroom next to yours. It might be the person with whom you ride back and forth to work. Now recall that good friend you talked with virtually every day back in high school. When was the last time you spoke with that person? If you no longer live close to where you went to high school, or if that good friend does not live near you, the odds are that you have not talked to that person in years! Is proximity all your friendship was based on? Not really, but that was a critical part of it. Research indicates that unless other factors are very strong, as proximity decreases, so does communication. If someone moves away, you may try to maintain contact for a while, but as time passes, those efforts will decrease. Over time, the communication may terminate completely.

Why do children talk to those who sit next to them in class? Because they are there. No matter how much the teacher moves children around to get them to stop talking to each other, he or she is fighting a losing battle. Proximity is the first factor influencing a child’s choice of communication targets. Seating a different child in the same proximate relationship will, at best, serve as only a temporary solution. This is one of those battles that is not worth fighting, for the teacher will lose one way or another. He or she will only alienate students by taking on the battle. Winning the battle can only mean stifling virtually all communication in the classroom, and that will do far more harm than good.

Attraction

People communicate more with those whom they find to be attractive than with those they find to be unattractive. We are not only talking about physical attraction, although that certainly is a critical factor for all of us from puberty on. As we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 6, there are three dimensions of interpersonal attraction: physical, social, and task. Simply defined: Does the person look good? Do we want to socialize with the person? Do we want to work with the person? If the answer to any one of these questions is yes, the probability is greater that we will seek to communicate with her or him.

The physical attractiveness factor becomes particularly noticeable in the upper-elementary and high school years. Boys are chasing girls, and girls are chasing boys. The desire to communicate about school decreases as other desires become more relevant.

Homophily

Literally, homophily refers to two living things coming from the same category. Two leaves from walnut trees, two collie dogs, two cities in northern Minnesota, or two people from Beckley, West Virginia, may be said to have homophily. In the
field of communication, homophily is commonly used to reference two people who are distinctly similar in one or more ways.

The principle of homophily, in part, suggests that the more similar two communicators are, the more likely they are to interact with each other. This is an extension of the old saying that "like attracts like." People with similar background and/or attitudes tend to form groups in which they do most of their communicating. Often, demographic similarities are sufficient for people to group themselves together for communication. Age, sex, race, and religion are powerful factors that can cause people to group together. No matter how much we as a society believe in equality, it remains far more likely that an Irish, Catholic, sixteen-year-old female will talk with someone who is demographically similar than it is that she will talk to a Japanese, Buddhist, fifty-seven-year-old male.

People choose to communicate with those who are like themselves because they believe they will have a better understanding of where that other person is coming from. People do not like uncomfortable interactions. Thus, if they confront a person who is clearly not like themselves, they are likely to avoid initiating interaction for fear that such discomfort might arise. This will not always be the case, for sometimes people actively seek to communicate with those who are very different from themselves to better understand other types of people. Nevertheless, initiation of such risky interactions remains a comparatively rare event.

Utility

Communication is necessary to satisfy most human needs. Hence, people choose to communicate with those who are in a position to help them meet their needs. We ask a clerk about how a product works because we don't want to buy it and then find we can't make it function. We stop in a convenience store to ask directions to where we are going so we won't get lost. Teachers ask the principal or the office staff how to interpret a rule so they can follow it. Students ask the teacher to explain a concept so they can understand and learn it. In short, we "use" others through our communication with them to satisfy our needs.

Loneliness or Frustration

Sometimes people reach out to communicate with others simply because they are lonely or frustrated by an absence of human contact. Although this factor may overlap somewhat with general "utility," which we just discussed, the need here is one for human interaction and companionship, not the utilitarian need for help from someone else through communication. When a person is lonely or frustrated, the communication itself is what is needed.

While some people—people often called "loners" or "hermits"—have little or no need or desire to interact with others, most people have a strong desire for human interaction. They have a need for "phatic" communication, if nothing else. Phatic communication is essentially talk for its own sake. Much of the communication in which we participate daily is of this type. Our greeting and goodbye rituals are
examples of such talk. It is our way of acknowledging others without getting involved with them. When someone talks to us, it ratifies our existence. It shows that somebody cares, if only a little!

If such contact is not a regular part of a person’s daily experience, he or she may need to reach out to obtain that contact from almost anyone. For instance, homemakers who spend all day with a small child for days on end often feel that what they need most is a chance to interact with another adult human being. If they do not obtain enough of that interaction from a spouse, they may take every opportunity available to interact with neighbors, delivery persons, salespersons, or anyone else who wanders into their path.

Loneliness is a powerful motivation for communication. Some students, even though they are around other students all day, have little or no interaction with these other students. They may be lonely because they are not conventionally attractive, because they come from a different demographic background, or because they receive little attention at home. Just like everyone else, these students have a need to interact with someone, virtually anyone. Often, these individuals will choose to initiate communication with a teacher. The interaction may be strained, and the teacher may not be able to understand why the student is taking up her or his time, but the interaction may be very important to the student. In fact, it may be virtually all the communicative contact he or she has in a day.

As we have seen, there are many reasons why people need to communicate. Children and students of all ages are, first of all, people. Thus, they experience the need to communicate, just like other people. And, lest we forget, so do teachers!

**The Acquaintance Process**

Whenever we come into contact with another person and anticipate that this contact will be continued into the future (as opposed to brief contact with a sales clerk or the like), we enter into the acquaintance process. Through this process, we presume we will “get to know” the other individual. This may or may not actually happen. To better understand how this special communication context functions, or fails to function, let’s examine how it normally takes place.

One of the first things that normally happens when we come into contact with a new person is that we introduce ourselves to each other. Sometimes this is initiated by a third party who knows both people. Sometimes one person knows who the other is and so only needs to introduce herself or himself. The initial interaction is normally restricted to such subjects as name, occupation, and where both people come from and/or live. Marital status and number of children may be discussed, although these are not always considered appropriate topics. More likely subjects are the weather and recent or upcoming sporting events in the area or on television.

Few initial interactions go further than this, and most do not even go this far. Depending on the extent of subsequent contact, this may be the only communication the two people have for the rest of their lives, even if they are neighbors
or work near each other. Nevertheless, if someone were to ask either one of these individuals whether they "know" the other, an affirmative response would be likely.

We don't really know most of the people we are quite willing to say we know. However, if we continue our interaction with a person substantially beyond this initial level, we are likely to get to know her or him much better. At the outset, topics of an intimate or personal nature are taboo, as they carry a high risk of offense. What would you think if a person you just met asked you what your sexual preferences were or if you had ever been fired from a job? Or, short of that, suppose the other person related to you her or his own sexual preferences or informed you that she or he had been fired last week? Such topics may never be appropriate, but certainly not in initial interactions.

As we interact with a person at greater length over an extended period of time, we may begin to share opinions about a variety of topics concerning work, hobbies, social interests, and the like. After a while, we may even engage in some discussion of religious or political views, but discussion of these topics is likely to terminate the relationship if begun too soon.

Only a very few of our relationships will mature and develop to the stage where communication about intimate topics would be considered appropriate. Thus, although we are generally not aware of it, most of us really "know" very few people. While the great majority of our communication is with the few people we know well, most of the individuals with whom we interact are, for all intents and purposes, strangers. Even if we have met them, we do not know them well enough to talk about serious matters with them. But sometimes, we must.

A basic principle of effective communication is that we need to adapt our messages to the person with whom we are communicating. Hence, as we meet and interact with another person, we are trying to understand what makes her or him "tick." We are seeking to understand the person's attitudes, beliefs, and values, her or his biases, philosophies, and unique experiences. We are trying to predict how the person will respond to our messages before we send them.

Because most of our interactions with people happen at a very superficial level, making good predictions is very difficult. We may be as likely to be wrong about how someone will react to what we say as we are to be right, or even more so. This can pose serious problems when it comes to communication in the classroom. To examine this, we need to explore the levels at which people can communicate.

**Levels of Communication**

The three levels of communication that are commonly identified in books on interpersonal communication are cultural, sociological, and psychological. Since much of the communication that happens in the instructional arena is of an interpersonal nature, this classification scheme is useful for our purposes.
Chapter 3

Cultural

The cultural level refers to what we know about people in large national or regional groups. At this level, we make predictions and interact using the kind of information we obtain in our normal interaction with someone, as we just described. This is the level at which the mass media must communicate the vast majority of the time. Little is known about the individual who is receiving the message, so stereotypes of how such people generally would react must be used to make the predictions we use for adaptation.

Note that we are not using the term stereotype in a derogatory fashion here. Stereotypes are simply generalizations based on incomplete information. They are derived from whatever general information is available about the group to which a person appears to belong. That information may be accurate for a very large portion of that group or for only a very small portion. Hence, the stereotype may be accurate for the person we are trying to communicate with, but it may not be. Conclusions based on stereotypes are very likely to be wrong—hence the negative associations attached to the idea of “stereotyping.” However, we all must base our communication predictions on such stereotypes until we have sufficient information to draw better conclusions. If all the information we have is a person’s ethnic background, age, and so on, we may know that that is not enough to guarantee good predictions, but nevertheless, we must still make predictions. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that most thinking people want to limit their interaction with others to “safe” topics until they know more about the person with whom they are communicating.

Sociological

When we communicate at the sociological level, we base our predictions about the other person not only on cultural-level information but also on information about the groups to which he or she belongs. Important information can be gleaned from knowledge about a person’s occupational group, political or religious affiliation, membership in social or service clubs, economic group, and so on. Although such information provides a far less than perfect basis for making predictions about a person’s beliefs, attitudes, and values, it is better than simply knowing that the person is a twenty-seven-year-old male Caucasian.

Although there is substantial variation in the orientations of individuals within any given group, people tend to come together in groups because of their similarities. As a result, stereotypes based on group affiliation and cultural variables are more likely to be accurate than those based on cultural variables alone. To know, for example, that a young woman is an active member of the National Organization for Women (NOW) will probably give us a fairly good picture of her attitudes on a number of current political issues. Similarly, if we know she is also a member of the chamber of commerce in her city, that information would indicate that she might feel strongly about some local concerns. It is vital to remember, however, that not all members of NOW or the chamber of commerce think alike. It is just that a guess
based on such cues has more likelihood of being right than it would be without the information. It still can be wrong.

**Psychological**

Communication at the psychological level involves making predictions based on knowledge of the other person as an individual rather than just as a member of a group or a culture. Conclusions drawn about how the person is most likely to act in a given situation, while still stereotypes, have a much greater likelihood of being accurate. This information is drawn from the individuals communicating with one another over time and feeds back into the communication of the individuals by reducing the number and seriousness of errors in prediction that people make.

Clearly, it is preferable to be able to communicate with another person at the psychological level. Doing so lets us adapt messages to the person more accurately and greatly increases the likelihood of effective communication. Unfortunately, most of us know very few people well enough to communicate with them at this level. Most people with whom we come into contact in our day-to-day lives must be dealt with only at a cultural or sociological level; we have no other choice.

When we enter the instructional arena, we find ourselves in a bit of a quandary. The highest probability we have for successfully communicating with students and hence enhancing their learning to the maximum degree possible occurs when a teacher is able to adapt to the personality of the individual student. But the reality is that teachers at most levels have so many students, they hardly know them as individuals at all.

Out of economic necessity, much of the education that takes place at the secondary and university levels must operate at the cultural level or, at best, the sociological level. It really is mass communication, not interpersonal communication. Messages must be developed by textbook writers, curriculum specialists, and individual teachers based on predictions made about learners in general. As we write this book, we are adapting to each reader via our stereotype of the "typical teacher." The fact that we have worked with thousands of elementary and secondary school teachers in our careers gives us a richer and more well-rounded stereotype to work with than someone who has had less such contact, but it is not as if we know you!

In spite of the fact that educators know an enormous amount about differences in students' learning styles, most instructional materials are not adapted to the learning styles of particular students. To do so would be almost impossible. Thus, in instructional communication, it is left to the individual teacher to adapt to the individual student. That is a tall order for the college instructor when a university course may enroll more than a thousand students, with more than two hundred in any section of the course. It is not much less difficult for the secondary school teacher who has five or six classes with thirty to forty students in each class. Let us not forget how challenging it is for the kindergarten teacher to adapt to twenty virtually unsocialized little ones running all over the room at once.

We must face up to the fact that most of the time we are not going to reach the desired psychological communication level when communicating with our
students. In fact, our students will actually have less difficulty adapting to us than we will to them. After all, each one of them has only a few of us with whom to cope! The more sophisticated students (not necessarily older; some second graders are quite sophisticated in this way) will be able to adapt to us, so as to enhance our communication with them.

Although we may never reach the ideal level of communication with every student, we can improve our communicative relationship with many of them. We can do this by simply recognizing that students communicate with the same motivations and limitations that we do. They are people, just as teachers are people. If teachers are willing to accept that fact and treat the students that way, the communication between teachers and students will be greatly enhanced. It will not be perfect, but, fortunately, it does not have to be.

References


Glossary

affinity  Liking, being attracted to, and/or wanting to be near some other person.
attraction  The degree to which a person wants to be with, and communicate with, another person.
communication motivations  The reasons why a person chooses to communicate or not to communicate.
homophily  The degree to which a person sees another person as being similar to her-or himself.
influence  The state of altering another person’s attitudes, beliefs, values, or behaviors.
level of communication  Representation of the depth of knowledge people have about one another. The cultural level indicates little knowledge; the sociological level indicates moderate knowledge; and the psychological level indicates much knowledge.
principle of homophily  The more similar two people are, the more likely they will attempt to communicate with each other, the more likely that communication will be successful, and the more alike the two people will become.
proximity  The degree of physical, or psychological, distance between people.