

Helping students have more positive experiences in the classroom: Part 2

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Abstract:

This article is the second in a two-part piece, published in 2005, that examines the relationship between a faculty member's classroom behaviors and students' interest in learning, students' responsibility for their own learning, the controlling of poor student behavior, and student evaluations of faculty.

Keywords: student experience | communication | teacher immediacy

Article:

Introduction

When I first started teaching college level communication courses at Coastal Carolina Community College in Jacksonville, North Carolina, I was 23 years-old and I looked like I was 18. After a few weeks in the classroom, I turned to the teaching and learning research for help. I was searching for a better understanding of my students as learners and hoping to find a magic cure for what was causing them to goof off. What I found was a small body of literature that pointed to me as the root of the problem. This literature connected communication studies and education in ways that made sense to me. I quickly learned that while I was not going to be able to change my age, I could do other things to raise the perceived closeness felt by my students towards me. In the end, that closeness would make a world of difference in how they behaved, learned, and would rate my performance at the end of the semester. It also offered me a great deal of satisfaction with the work I was doing in the classroom.

That body of literature, known as Teacher Immediacy, has grown substantially in the fourteen years that have passed. As identified in the first part of this article written by Sarah Wilde, Immediacy can be defined as "the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between people" (Richmond, 2002, p. 68). I have come to know, first hand, the power of this perceived closeness in the classroom. While teacher immediacy can be examined in varying ways, this article will look at the areas of teacher appearance, gestures and movement, face and eye communication, and the use of space and time.

Appearance

Dress in the classroom is a personal choice that some associate with academic freedom. Note that students will assign meaning to the way a teacher dresses. Teachers who dress formally are perceived as being competent, organized, prepared, and knowledgeable about course content. Teachers who dress casually are perceived as friendly, outgoing, receptive, flexible, and fair. Those who dress too formally are thought of as being non-receptive to the needs of the student but still competent in course content. Those who dress too casually are thought to be more immediate but maybe not as competent as their peers.

Immediate teachers tend to dress formally for the first week or two of a term until they have established their credibility. At this point they can then dress more casually to project an image that they are open to student-teacher interactions. When projecting this image, teachers need to be ready for student-teacher dialogue. Projecting the image and not playing the role will likely result in confusion and overall dissatisfaction on the part of the student and can result in unfavorable teacher evaluations at the end of the semester.

Gestures and Movement



Teachers who use more gestures and movement while presenting course materials are perceived as either being excited (about the material) or in the midst of offering complex messages/course content. Those who present fewer gestures and movement are perceived as either being bored themselves or transmitting simple messages/course content.

Adaptors are hand and arm gestures that generally satisfy some need of the speaker. These movements can be related to speaker nervousness and include habits such as the clicking of a pen, playing with hair, biting nails, or tapping fingers. Teachers who use a great number of these behaviors can be perceived as being anxious or bored. If students assign this meaning to such behavior, the result can often be student misbehavior and increased disruptiveness.

Teachers can expect the same result if their course materials are presented in such a way that they are not dynamic and animated. Teachers who are dynamic and animated keep class members more interested in the subject for longer periods of time. Teachers looking to increase their immediacy should apply more gestures that look and feel natural and then strive to make them more animated and dynamic.

While covering course materials, immediate teachers resist the temptation to stand or sit behind a table or podium. While walking about the class encourages students to stay on task, it also keeps their interest. The open posture stance of an immediate teacher sends the message of closeness and receptivity. On a related note, students whose body positions are closed (e.g., folded arms) or unreceptive (e.g., slouching in the chair) signal their lack of interest.

Face and Eye

The face expresses our true feelings and emotions. To avoid being perceived as uninterested or bored, immediate teachers do not offer a dull, unexpressive face. Teachers who employ such dull facial behaviors experience greater student disruptions and boredom. Teachers who are perceived as interested in their students offer pleasing facial movements, positive head nodding, and frequent smiles. This body language helps their students feel more comfortable about volunteering to talk as they can expect a positive or at least encouraging response from their teacher. Immediate teachers in turn, offer such responses.

Teachers with little eye contact appear to be shy or uninterested in their students. Immediate teachers use eye contact as a signal to let their students know when to ask questions, talk, or approach them. This increased eye contact allows teachers to be more animated if they wish. When teachers make eye contact they are perceived as being more interested and immediate. In return, they are rewarded with better student conduct.

Immediate teachers are careful not to read their course materials from slides or other notes. They also look into the eyes of students in the entire room, not just one section. Immediate teachers look into the actual eyes of their students not the back wall and not the tops of heads.

Space and Time

The immediate teacher avoids treating the classroom as a space in which s/he has a public relationship with all those present. Such a public relationship would call for the teacher to stand behind a podium and offer the class a semester worth of speeches during which the students listen and take notes. Non-immediate behaviors, such as staying behind a desk or podium, send messages of the teacher as uncaring, unreceptive, and unapproachable. After perceiving this for a semester, students may voice their complaints at the end of semester course. Immediate teachers think of the classroom as a personal or social space in which they interact with students more closely. Immediacy favors teacher-student proximity of between 1.5 and 12 feet, depending on the communication situation. Immediate teachers look to communicate in the whole classroom, not just the front of the room.

Immediate teachers use time as a reward to students for good behavior, as a means of control, and a way to make class more interesting and to learn more about others. Teachers who wish to improve upon their own immediacy should strive to keep the attention of their students by using a variety of teaching methods and activities to teach course materials. Generally speaking, immediate teachers are careful not to require their students to sit still and pay attention for more than fifteen minutes at a time. Where possible, a topic or content change every ten minutes is

more immediate and can be perceived as a “break” from the perspective of students. Immediate teachers also make time for content previews at the start of class, reviews at the close, and transitions between ideas/concepts/theories during the class session.

Immediate teachers know that they need to arrive to class on time or early if they expect their students to take the course seriously. By arriving early, the immediate teacher has the opportunity to interact with students. If a teacher is constantly late, the students perceive the teacher to be uninterested in the content area or unconcerned about them; therefore, students, too, may begin arriving late for class. If a particular student arrives late time after time, the immediate teacher, having already established open student-teacher communication, can approach the student at the close of class to discuss the issue. When an immediate teacher privately requests that a student arrive on time, the student will be more likely to accommodate the request without causing a scene.

Conclusion

Richmond and McCroskey (2004) offer an extensive list of positive outcomes from the teacher immediacy literature. Although many are pointed out in the pages of this two-part piece, it can be useful to see them listed as they are in the 2004 book. These positive outcomes include the following:

- Increase liking, affiliation, and positive affect on the part of the student
- Increase student affect for the subject matter, cognitive learning, and motivation to learn
- Student perception of the teacher as a competent communicator who listens and cares
- Positive forms of behavior control
- Higher evaluations from students and one’s immediate supervisor
- Opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge, and take responsibility for their own learning.

Overall, I have found adding more immediacy to my teaching has been well worth the time and effort. Those interested in adding more immediacy to their teaching should look at all of the categories presented in this two-part article in deciding which changes are desirable and which are attainable. A good starting point might be to examine the questions asked of your students when evaluating you at the end of each semester. This will identify what the department values in your teaching. Past evaluations will offer a benchmark with which to measure future progress.

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