

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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by

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Introduction. When the topic of nonverbal behavior is brought up with teachers, many will reply with "Oh, you mean gestures and facial expressions -- yeah, I know all about that." Since all human beings are constantly engaged in nonverbal behavior and most have at least some degree of self awareness, there is a grain of truth in the response. But, truthfully, can we imagine that anyone "knows all about" nonverbal behavior? Unlikely! Many experienced teachers will have developed some skill in noticing and responding to nonverbal behaviors of students. Very few have much awareness of their own nonverbals. This is not surprising. Ordinarily we get very little feedback on our nonverbals. Other people will comment on what we verbalize but will not comment on what we signal nonverbally. In other words it is very difficult to see one's self in action. Further, almost without exception, no teacher preparation institution, no school, and no single teacher deliberately formulates and teaches a nonverbal curriculum.

Fortunately, there is a growing knowledge of the principles and processes of nonverbal communication and there are increasing attempts to relate this knowledge to classroom contexts. We can briefly note six assumptions about nonverbal communication which have support from studies in psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Basic reality.^{1,2} Whenever human beings are in contact with one another, there exists between them a basic reality which is tacitly understood and shared but not expressed in words. This nonverbal reality performs at least two functions: the expression of feeling and emotion and the control or regulation of other behaviors-including speech. Since teachers and

students are in continuous interaction, the importance of nonverbal in the classroom seems incontestable.

Relationship language.³ A teacher's attitude toward a pupil can be inferred from the way in which she looks at him, or avoids looking at him; in sitting or standing distance between self and pupils; in the types of movements which the teacher employs toward pupils, and so on. These and other nonverbal behaviors 'set the stage' for the relationships which are to obtain between teacher and pupil. Gaze, body attitudes, facial expressions and distancing are cues signalling aloofness, intimacy, concern or indifference. Thus we say that these cues are the unspoken determiners of human relationships.

Nonverbals carry feelings. Although a teacher may express her feelings verbally, these may be contradicted or amplified by her actions, facial expression or posture. Pupils may be unconvinced by the words they hear from their teacher because her nonverbals give a more important message. Emotions such as fear, hate, love, anger, and anxiety do find expression in words; however, the real power of these and similar emotions is usually conveyed by nonverbal cues such as "tight lips", "rigid posture", "warm smile", "shaky voice", etc.

Nonverbals qualify.⁴ By paying close attention to nonverbal behaviors, a listener is able to determine just how he is to understand what a speaker is saying. For example, a teacher's voice may have a tentative, quavering quality while she asks her pupils to stop talking. The quavering voice may signal the pupils that it is all right to continue talking in spite of the verbal orders of the teacher. Or a teacher who invites a pupil to take a seat at her side while they work together on a problem is signalling that her

words can be taken seriously, she is willing to share her attention and private space with the pupil. A very different 'stage' is set by the teacher who directs the pupil to stand while she remains seated. The pupil is directed by the distance and difference in posture to understand that what is transpiring between them is 'official'.

Nonverbal leakage.⁵ Another important function of nonverbal behavior is that it 'leaks' information about the true motives, intentions, and messages of the sender. Using speech, most persons have a remarkable capacity to mask or censor their thoughts and express only what will bring them advantage as they understand the situation. Since most persons remain relatively unaware of their own nonverbal behaviors, they are unable to exert control over them and censor nonverbal messages in the same way that they are able to control speech.

Certain nonverbal behaviors are associated with the roles of "teacher" and "student".⁶ Throughout our culture teachers can be observed in the act of snapping their fingers to get attention, holding finger to lips to achieve silence, folding arms to signal disapproval, and pointing to give directions. Students learn to "look" like they are listening, nod head to indicate understanding, and "appear" busy. Very early in school children begin to learn various hand-raising strategies. Various teacher and pupil nonverbals are used to supplement or take the place of verbal behaviors. It is unwise for teachers to ignore or underestimate the importance of these nonverbals for they are often powerful regulators of speech meanings and operate to control social processes. Whenever verbal information is in doubt, missing, or misleading, then nonverbal language is critical in determining what happens next.

Interpersonal communication is a two-way, reciprocating process made up of two major ingredients: verbal and nonverbal. In the rest of this paper we will attempt to underline the importance of classroom nonverbal communication and give some indications of how classroom teachers can develop their own nonverbal potentials.

Verbal domination. There is little doubt that the majority of classrooms from kindergarten to graduate school are dominated by 'teacher talk,' and rarely does the proportion of teacher-talk fall below 50% of the total speech flow. In many secondary classrooms this ratio increases to 80% and above. In university classrooms the proportion of teacher talk is frequently over 90% and a 99% domination is not unheard of.

One way to combat the verbal domination of students by teachers -- a condition Ivan Illich has named 'narration sickness' -- is to recognize that human meaning rests on much more than words. Often it is the nonverbal that carries the real message impact and shows the truth (or lack of it) in what we say.

What we say is certainly important; and how we speak may be even more important. The tone, rate, volume and pitch of our voice, the pauses, and the non-speech signs that accompany our words may say a great deal more, including the truth, than words alone say. When we learn to listen to how a person speaks as well as hearing what he says, we are tuning in to the subtle language of the nonverbal. This is the language of the 'pointing' finger, the 'loving' glance, the 'strutting' walk, the 'furtive' smile, and the 'thoughtful' silence; it is also the 'touch' of the hand, the 'look' of the face, the 'movement' of the body.

Consider the following brief teaching sequence that illustrates the language of nonverbal in action.

The teacher: walked from the desk toward the children; opened a book; looked down at a question in the planbook; placed his left hand on top of the page; looked up at the children; closed the book on finger; raised hand to write on board; wrote 'Describe the cloud formation you see today,'; turned toward the class; looked and pointed to a boy near the window.

This sequence was done nonverbally, effectively and with good control.

Movements and expressions are of two kinds. Many of the bodily movements and facial expressions used by teachers fall in one of two classes: instructional or personal. Instructional motions are an integral part of the teaching process and may be performed either consciously or unconsciously. When a teacher points to an area on a map she is using an instructional motion. Such a motion communicates essential meanings which are directly related to the teaching task. A skilled teacher has learned that instructional motions used correctly are economical, and effective, and put her more 'in touch' with the children's meaning level.

In contrast to deliberate instructional motions, we can observe a teacher scratching her ear, adjusting jewelry or clothing, walking with a stiff gait, folding her arms across her chest, or rising from a chair in a graceful, centered movement. These motions are personal and not deliberately used by a teacher to supplement instructional speech.

Personal motions are signs of what one consciously or subconsciously has learned as important self-presenting gestures; they indicate efforts to gain balance, reduce tension and achieve bodily comfort; and they may indicate such inner states as preoccupations, tension, headaches and other pains, moods, etc.

Informal research suggests that about 25% of teacher motions can be classes as personal and about 75% as instructional. Ironically, it is often the personal motions that carry the most powerful messages in classroom interaction just as in other aspects of daily living.

Actions and feelings are inseparable. The impact of our actions is especially significant with regard to feelings since action is inseparable from the feelings we either knowingly or unwittingly express in our daily interactions. It is just these feelings that determine the effectiveness of our actual relationships on the intimate, social and working levels.

With feelings, others will often rely more on what we do -- that is, rely on our gestures, posture, movements, and what we say. This is especially true when feelings are masked or contradictory.

Consider the following example of intercommunication between a principal and group of students. A number of intervening comments by both principal and students have been omitted.

Principal: (Walking behind desk and sitting back in chair.) 'Come in and sit down. I'm sure you know that my door is always open. We need to keep all the issues out in the open. Communication is important. We had our misunderstandings last time -- let's clear the deck today.'

Student: 'I'd like to find out why I was told to report to the office and given a lecture by Mr. ... All I was doing was holding hands with my boyfriend out in front of the building.'

Principal: (Smiling and leaning forward.) 'I'm sure you're aware of the school rules about that. I'm not prepared to discuss that whole matter again.'

In the first instance the principal's words appear to invite openness and frankness, while his physical actions distance him from the students. In the second, while the facial expression and body movement suggest friendliness, the principal's words denote distance and closedness.

Persons who have a keen awareness of nonverbal can accurately communicate their own feelings and intentions. They are more successful in working relationships where persuasion, leadership and organizing of others is involved than are individuals with limited awareness of nonverbal.

The teacher with high nonverbal awareness is able to arrange the environment of the classroom so as to enhance learning, communication and interaction. The physical space people work in acts as a background for their communicative interactions and can either foster or deter effective and lively ways of learning and relating. Habitual and rigid schemes of arranging classroom furniture can go a long way toward 'deadening' the classroom atmosphere.

Teachers transmit attitudes to children. Some teachers have developed a fatalistic (there is nothing I can do; I don't have enough space) and insensitive attitude toward nonverbal (children are here to learn, we don't have time for moving around and 'playing' with the furniture).

One can hardly fail to be profoundly impressed with the insensitivity that is shown by many university students to the communicative aspects of classroom learning. It is as though they have learned that the classroom is a place where one comes to die for 50 minutes and this event should preferably take place as far from the instructor as possible. Further, many exhibit strong resistance to new and experimental patterns of communication that would engage them as active participants.

Unless teachers at all levels of schooling are turned on to the nonverbal in their own classroom behavior and environment, they indirectly foster fatal-istic and insensitive attitudes in their pupils.

The range and total number of nonverbal behaviors is enormous. A

careful analysis suggests that most nonverbal behavior expresses one of three

feelings: like-dislike, status, or responsiveness. Each of these is important

in teaching. When we like something - whether it is a person, an object or an

idea - we approach. Whatever we dislike, we avoid.

Consider the following example from a second-grader on nonverbal and

liking: 'Guess what, Mom? My teacher likes me!' 'Why, Jimmy, what did she

say?' 'She didn't say nothing, but I know she likes me, 'cause when I was

reading she put her arm around me and smiled at me. She's nice, I like school!'

There is probably no human arrangement on earth where status does not

play some part. Certainly, an important dimension in classroom interaction is

status. Status-actions communicate a controlling or dominance-submissive

attitude. A teacher may send status messages through speech: 'No one gets

away with that in my room!' or 'When you are older, you will know the answer

to that.'

However, other status messages are sent through the nonverbal. The

arrangement of furniture, standing 'tall in the saddle' behind the lecturer,

making a child stand while being reprimanded, or, conversely, standing while

the child is covering in a chair, are all means of conferring status.

A great deal of classroom conflict revolves around issues of status.

Consider the following comments by a ninth-grader:

"I just can't stand the way Mr. X "puffs" out his chest and marches up

and down in front of the class. He spouts off like no one else knew anything. You'd think he'd realize how he looks - like a toad or something.' It is a pretty safe bet that the status message this teacher presents in his manner of walking, posture and sound of voice have a powerful impact on students.

Responsiveness refers to the degree of one person's awareness of, and reaction to, another. A highly responsive teacher has a stimulating effect upon students - he is alive, active and aware of 'what's going on here.' On the other hand, a teacher who is tired, indifferent, and apathetic is only vaguely aware of pupils and has a deadening effect. Much lively responsiveness is shown through such nonverbals as posture, facial expression, tone of voice and eye contact.

Training is needed. Sensitive teachers have some awareness of the nonverbal. For example, one teacher commented, 'When I see a child starting to distract other children, I seldom say anything. Instead I may just look at him quietly and firmly; other times I nod my head slightly and give a smile that recognizes but does not encourage or I may even walk towards him or beckon him to where I am and then give him some new task.'

Another experienced teacher observed: 'When I look at work which a pupil is doing at his seat, I often put my hand on his shoulder - then he knows that for this moment, I am really paying attention to him.' These remarks show a sensitivity to the influence of nonverbal in the classroom.

For the most part, though, teachers remain ignorant of their nonverbal influence. And why wouldn't they be? Although nonverbal is a powerful and pervasive influence in learning, it remains unnoticed in most teacher education programs. In one of the more extensive studies of nonverbal in teaching,

Barbara Grant and Dorothy Hennings⁷ conclude that teaching effectiveness can be improved by:

- training to increase a teachers' awareness of nonverbal in the classroom, especially one's own behaviors;
- experimenting with, and practising, new nonverbal options, and
- deliberate selection by the teacher of those options that more efficiently meet the teaching/learning needs of a classroom.

How is the teacher to increase his range of nonverbal options? In formal training, such as a teacher education program at a university, there is little possibility for the development and practice of nonverbal awareness and options until the importance of nonverbal is 'unofficially' recognized by the governing bodies of faculties of education. While such writers as Aldous Huxley have emphasized the importance of the 'nonverbal humanities' for many years, serious attention to nonverbal within education is just now beginning.

At present, informal methods, such as workshops and self-study, are feasible means of bringing the ABCs of nonverbal to classroom teachers. These ABCs of nonverbal are: Awareness, Behavior and Communication.

A teacher who has increased his nonverbal awareness, has developed more conscious control over his own nonverbal behaviors, and has incorporated his awareness and conscious behavior into patterns of effective interpersonal communication has begun to master the ABCs of nonverbal. We will now examine two informal methods for seeking these goals.

Self-help with nonverbal. For the teacher who has no access to formal courses on nonverbal and who wishes to actualize his nonverbal potential, we have worked out a program of self-activated nonverbal development (SAND).⁸

It requires a learning partner, a set of reading materials, several observation inventories, and a fair degree of self-motivation. Here is a brief description of SAND, which consists of seven steps that can be carried out in any school setting.

1. Partner. The first step is to choose one or several partners who teach in the same building as you and who share your interest in nonverbal communication.
2. Read and share. The second step is to read and then discuss with your partners a set of resource materials on nonverbal. Reading and discussing the materials starts the process of awareness.
3. Self-observation. The third step is to complete a nonverbal behavior inventory for yourself. This will help you focus on your own behaviors. After each partner has completed an inventory, meet, discuss and share reactions with each other. At this point you should try to identify those behaviors most typical of yourself.
4. Mutual observation. The fourth step is to visit each other's classrooms for several brief (20-30 minutes) periods for the express purpose of noting each other's nonverbals and how pupils react to them.
5. Options. After each has observed the other partner 'in action,' meet for the purpose of comparing self-observations with observations by another, and deciding on some 'options' to replace, improve or further develop typical verbal and nonverbal behavior. It is very important to remember that options include substituting a nonverbal behavior for a verbal; replacing one nonverbal with another; further developing or modifying an already existing nonverbal or replacing a nonverbal with a verbal. Check out your decisions with your partner and listen to his reactions.

6. Experiment. Now try out, play with, and experiment with options in your classroom. Remember that a teacher who has increased nonverbal awareness and a greater range of physical actions has also increased his mental awareness. Everything we try doesn't work. If something doesn't work, don't use it. If it does, develop it further.

7. Review. After having completed the six steps outlined above, meet with your partner(s) and share your reactions to what you have discovered about yourself and others in the subtle world of the nonverbal. You may even decide to initiate a second cycle of SAND.

For the classroom teacher who wishes to pursue the study of nonverbal and the implications of nonverbal to his own teaching, we suggest the following materials as interesting, informative, and useful:

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In conclusion. Why should a classroom teacher spend time and effort on efforts to better understand and use nonverbal behaviors? One very important result is the increase in self-awareness and accompanying ability to use a greater range of options in most communicative encounters. The key to solving difficult interpersonal conflicts often rests in one's ability to understand

nonverbal cues. More effective instruction depends in part on better utilization of communication--especially reduction of teacher "talk" and better rapport with students. How the teacher presents himself as a person is of utmost importance in the classroom. This has been masterfully demonstrated by Bel Kaufman in Up the down staircase. Certainly a large part of Miss Barret's rapport with her students was determined by her personal appearance and clothes. Our clothes, our jewelry, our body adornments and personal objects which we characteristically use, are part of that realm of nonverbal called "object language" and, as such, act as important regulators of communication with our pupils, colleagues, and parents. And, not least of all, an increased awareness of nonverbal can lead to greater clarity of communication in all relationships, a better control over subtle determiners of meaning, and may even reduce deception. That great philosopher of communication, Martin Buber, has observed that the loss of genuine dialogue at all levels of social interaction is the sickness of our age. Any individual who takes steps to improve and authenticate his own dialogue is doing his bit to remedy the sickness. Teachers are in especially important positions for by direct example and by instruction they have the opportunity to influence countless others in the direction of improved, authentic communication.

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