

*Nonverbal behavior, a communication process poorly understood and controlled by most teachers, can greatly enhance the image of the teacher and the affective learning of students.*

## *Instructor Nonverbal Communication: Listening to Our Silent Messages*

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Successful instruction, learning, and communication are inextricably linked. Both communication and instruction are processes that attempt to establish meaning, transmit messages and influence thinking. Both are said to occur when information is exchanged or behavior is altered. The communication process is the primary means by which instruction is accomplished, contributing substantially to student learning. This chapter examines one aspect of the relationship between communication and instruction by emphasizing instructors' nonverbal behaviors that enhance student learning.

Obviously, college instruction can be improved in a variety of ways. Better facilities, better students, better instructional materials, and better teachers improve instruction. In fact, many of these components interact with each other. For example, excellent materials encourage better instruction from teachers which creates greater student motivation. However, in an era of tighter budgets and declining or steady-state financial support for instructional facilities and materials, instructor improvement is a most important resource. Most instructors recognize that teaching becomes more rewarding as one becomes more effective, and most want to improve their teaching.

realized when meaning is attached to the behavior by a receiver. *Nonverbal* refers to communicative messages which are nonlinguistic, analogic, and processed primarily by the brain's right hemisphere (Andersen and others, 1979b). Gestures, facial expressions, physical appearance, touching behavior, spatial arrangement, and paralinguistic are generally nonverbal messages. However, sign language is most commonly classified as verbal communication even though it uses gestures, since it is linguistic, often digital (particularly when finger spelling), and usually processed in the brain's left or language hemisphere. A few messages are difficult to classify as verbal or nonverbal. Understanding of the area is facilitated if nonverbal and verbal are thought of as two ends of a message continuum: Some messages may be classified as more verbal or more nonverbal in nature.

In classroom settings, verbal and nonverbal messages occur together—reinforcing, undercutting, emphasizing, regulating, modifying, accenting, complementing, and contradicting each other. While this chapter focuses on nonverbal communication by teachers, student nonverbal behavior is equally important and should be considered when attempting to explain or control overall classroom atmosphere. No matter what the source, nonverbal messages are continuous; in the presence of another person, it is impossible not to communicate a nonverbal message. Even an attempt to terminate communication by silently starting or leaving a room signals a message. Thus, whether talking or not, instructors are continuously communicating. Their gestures, body movements, facial expressions, eye behavior, use of space and time, physical appearance, and physique continue to send messages even when they are silent. When talking, their vocal pitch, speaking rate, volume, and accent provide additional nonverbal information.

#### Influence of Nonverbal Communication

The influence of nonverbal messages on human interaction is substantial. The most widely quoted statistic (Mehrabian, 1972) claims that 93 percent of the meaning in human interaction comes from nonverbal messages, while only 7 percent emanates from verbal messages. Although many researchers do not support such a large estimate, the significance of nonverbal communication in interactions is not questioned. Two studies that directly measured the relative importance of nonverbal communication in an instructional setting found it to be more important than the verbal component (Balzer, 1969; Keith and others, 1974).

In classroom settings, teacher and student communication behaviors influence each other. Communication is largely a reciprocal act—we give people what we perceive they have given us. The origination of reciprocity is difficult to isolate—it is a chicken-egg argument—but a participant can alter the cycle at any point. Even though the instructor's communication

An important factor in the communication process, contributing substantially to instructional effectiveness, is the instructor's nonverbal behavior. Yet this is not well understood or widely recognized as an instructional asset. There are at least four explanations for this oversight. First, the bulk of research in the area has been conducted in the past decade and has not been disseminated widely in readily available sources. (See Wullf, 1983, for a selected bibliography.) Second, this research consists of isolated studies from a variety of disciplines which were not integrated conceptually until recently. Woolfolk and Brooks (1983) offer a helpful integrative review of the influence of nonverbal communication in teaching. Third, the importance of nonverbal behavior in the instructional process has been acknowledged in elementary and secondary settings but largely ignored for college classrooms (Smith, 1979). Perhaps this results from an assumption that college students learn what they need to regardless of teaching competence, or from a university norm that teaching is secondary to research and university service. Our educational system mirrors this value by requiring elementary and secondary teachers to study teaching while assuming that college professors automatically have adequate teaching skills. Content competence and instructional competence are presumed to be one and the same capability.

Finally, nonverbal communication may not have received educators' serious attention because of popularization and trivialization of the area. Beginning with Julius Fast's bestseller *Body Language*, and continuing with numerous popular magazine articles and television news specials, the American public has become aware of the influence of nonverbal communication. Many of those sources, however, have depicted this body of knowledge as a new weapon for superficial, self-serving, manipulative, and upwardly mobile individuals. Publicized claims were overly simple, frequently inaccurate, and often more akin to astrology than to science. With this shadow obscuring the significance of the area, it is not surprising that many serious scholars and readers have largely ignored the literature of nonverbal communication. For whatever reasons, few college professors are aware of how to use their nonverbal behavior to enhance instructional effectiveness.

#### Definition of Terms

Although communication scholars differ on definitions of "communication" and "nonverbal behavior," statements of these terms are necessary if we are to share a common referent. *Communication* is a process that occurs whenever one person stimulates meaning in the mind of a receiver or changes the behavior of a receiver. It is not necessarily an intentional process, nor is it always a conscious one. Communication and behavior are inseparable; any behavior has communicative potential that is

is also influenced by the cycle, he or she is in a good directing position to alter classroom communication.

### Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication behaviors serve many functions: they communicate warmth and affect; indicate approval or disapproval of others; define the nature of the relationship; indicate relative power and status; reveal current emotional states; regulate and pace verbal exchanges; provide cues for impression formation; influence and persuade; reveal one's level of tension or relaxation; indicate one's culture, values, attitudes, gender, and background; and influence the performance of others (Rosenfeld and Civiky, 1976). In instructional settings, nonverbal communication also functions to enhance learning, particularly affective learning.

Communication messages have both content and relational components (Watzlawick and others, 1967). The *content* component is the literal meaning or the denotative verbal translation of the message. The *relationship* component of a message signals the nature of the relationship and suggests how that literal verbal meaning is to be interpreted. For example, the statement "This material is quite difficult but with some effort you will be able to manage" is accompanied by very different meanings depending on the relationship of the interactants. When said by one student to another it could be a compliment or an insult. The sincerity of the difficulty claim, the relationship between the students, and the speaker's degree of familiarity with the receiver's ability create differing interpretations of the message's content. If the instructor makes this statement to a student, it might be a challenge, an accurate assessment of difficulty and ability, or a belittling insult. It could suggest that the student recognizes the instructor's power, or it could signal the instructor's concern. The relational components of messages often alter the meaning of the message in subtle and confusing ways. Nonverbal communication functions as a device to signal how the content or literal component of the message is to be interpreted and understood.

### Nonverbal Communication and Learning

Nonverbal communication has its most direct instructional impact on the affective domain of learning, which is concerned with student likes and dislikes, attitudes, values, beliefs, appreciations, and interests. In addition to learning facts and concepts, students also learn attitudes towards the content area and predispositional patterns that motivate them to use that knowledge in their lives. The affective domain centers on these learned attitudes and orientations toward the subject area (Krathwohl and others, 1964).

Although college instructors seldom address this domain directly, affective learning is a valued goal. No matter what discipline we teach, we share the goal of creating lifelong learners. For example, English instructors hope students retain their ability to analyze a play or a novel but also hope to motivate them to attend plays and read novels after they complete the literature class. Few music instructors would claim success if their students learned to recognize the works of classical composers but developed an aversion to classical music in the process. Students who learn the laws of physics or biology in the classroom but never think about them after the semester ends have not been well educated. In any discipline, we are interested not only in cognitive or psychomotor learning, but also in creating positive student affect towards the content area.

The instructor's communicative behavior in general and nonverbal behavior in particular has a significant impact on affective learning. In one study (Andersen, 1979), almost one-fourth of the variation in both student liking for the content area and student desires to take future courses in the content area was a function of the instructor's nonverbal behavior. Over half of the variation in student liking for the instructor was the result of the instructor's nonverbal communication. These nonverbal messages of liking and affect require further discussion.

**Nonverbal Liking and Affect.** The communication of liking or positive affect is largely a nonverbal phenomenon. Instructors seldom verbalize their feelings, yet students seem to know instructors' attitudes toward students, content areas, and the general teaching process. Students infer these affective data from the instructor's nonverbal behaviors.

Factor-analytic studies indicate that positive affect is communicated through a cluster of nonverbal behaviors, labeled *immediacy behaviors* (Andersen, 1979; Andersen and others, 1979a). Immediacy behaviors increase arousal and sensory closeness, and communicate social accessibility. The nonverbal behaviors most closely associated with the immediacy cluster include eye contact, smiling, vocal expressiveness, physical proximity, appropriate touching, leaning toward a person, gesturing, using overall body movements, being relaxed, and spending time with someone. Andersen and Andersen (1982) provide a detailed review of nonverbal immediacy as it functions in instruction.

In short, immediacy behaviors communicate feelings of warmth and support and engender feelings of interpersonal attraction. Individuals behave in immediate ways when involved with others they like, and they like others who also behave in immediate ways. Immediacy is a spontaneous manifestation of positive affect and is processed, often unconsciously, as such. In classroom settings, instructors who use nonverbal immediacy behaviors manifest greater liking and affect towards their students and engender higher student affect. The climate of positive affect extends beyond the interactants to the subject matter and the discipline (Andersen and Andersen, 1982).

It is important to realize that immediacy behaviors, like most non-verbal impressions, are processed as a gestalt or holistic impression. Therefore, instructors wishing to increase immediacy should select those immediacy behaviors with which they feel most comfortable. If an instructor is perceived as cold, distant, or aloof, he or she can consciously engage in additional immediacy to enhance perceptions of warmth and increase affective learning. However, instructors who feel cold, negative, and aloof towards students because they dislike teaching or dislike "those immature undergraduates" will probably have trouble feigning immediacy. Considerable nonverbal research indicates that true feelings leak to receivers in a number of ways (Mehrabian, 1971). Thus, a sincere positive attitude is a crucial prerequisite for the successful communication of immediacy. Interestingly, some research (Collins, 1976) indicates that teachers trained to be more immediate and enthusiastic do begin to feel more positive towards teaching.

An additional manifestation of high affect occurs when persons mirror each other's body positions and synchronize with each other's behaviors. Interactants who like each other match each other's body orientations, speech and pause rates, gestures, eye behavior, and posture. Mirroring is difficult to do consciously, although some counselors suggest this as an effective strategy to increase client trust and satisfaction, yet it seems to occur without effort once the positive affect develops. This may explain why instructors who generate high student affect seldom have discipline or classroom control problems. The entire class group is "in synch" and is coordinated with the instructor.

*Regulation of Talk.* One of the major functions of nonverbal communication is to regulate verbal interaction. Individuals use nonverbal messages to indicate when they wish to speak and when they wish to give the speaking turn to another person. Through eye contact, they even designate who will be the next speaker. Nonverbally, instructors signal that it is a student's turn to talk by dropping their pitch, dropping gestures, relaxing and leaning back slightly, and ending a vocal phrase by looking directly at the student expected to respond. An instructor can shorten student responses and acquire the speaking floor more quickly by nodding his or her head rapidly, opening his or her mouth as if to talk, inhaling, gesturing, leaning forward, and verbalizing during the first pause that is accompanied by eye contact.

These subtle cues provide a smooth conversational flow, making interruptions the rude exception rather than the norm. In classrooms, turn-taking is formalized somewhat with hand raising, but the same regulating cues play an important role. If a teacher wishes to curtail an overly eager student's contributions, this can be done tactfully. Rather than ignore, avoid, or embarrass the student into speaking less, the instructor can acknowledge him or her through eye contact that occurs while the

instructor is in the middle of an utterance. This timing of eye contact will signal recognition but will not invite verbal reaction. At the end of the utterance, the instructor should avoid eye contact with the overly eager student and consciously look directly at another student. Unless that student is extremely reticent, he or she will feel the conversational pressure and provide a response.

*Classroom Control.* In addition to regulating conversations, non-verbal behavior allows teachers to implement control strategies that are more agreeable to students. Few individuals like to be scolded or ridiculed, and many resent authoritarian attempts to control. Skilled leaders use nonverbal behavior to subtly direct others' behaviors. Instructors can, for example, use eye contact, facial expressions, and simple gestures to regulate unwanted interaction, stimulate desired behavior, and remind students of the teacher's position.

Unwanted extraneous interaction can also be curtailed tactfully through nonverbal communication. For example, students who disrupt class attention by their side talking often believe that they are doing it unnoticed. Consider how seldom such disruption occurs from students seated in the front-center of the room. The instructor can decrease this unwanted interaction by simply making the students aware of the instructor's presence through increased eye contact or movement that places the ambulating lecturer near the conversing students. This control may cause the talkers to feel a bit embarrassed or apologetic, but tends to eliminate the defensive me-against-you climate that often occurs when they are chided in public.

From my workshop experiences with instructors, I have found that stimulating desired student interaction is an important goal. This goal is largely accomplished through nonverbal behavior. Ironically, instructors who express a desire for more student interaction may fail to give their students nonverbal signals of this goal. Instructor immediacy behaviors such as smiling, gesturing, being vocally expressive, and reducing spatial barriers create greater student rapport and improve the likelihood of interaction. Use of nonverbal conversational regulators that give the floor to students also heightens class interaction. Instructors often fail to establish eye contact with students, stay poised as if to continue speaking, hold their gestures and their pitch, and pause only for a brief moment. These nonverbal cues signal that the verbal attempt to stimulate interaction should be interpreted as a rhetorical question rather than as a true invitation to participate.

One of the most effective means for stimulating interaction is pause time accompanied by direct eye contact. When teachers do this, students feel the conversational pressure. However, the pause time may need to be ten to fifteen seconds—an awkward silence for most students and instructors. Learning to feel comfortable with this pause time is an important step in generating greater student participation.

Finally, a supportive and productive classroom climate can be enhanced through the instructor's nonverbal messages of power and status. The literature on attraction suggests that we like those who are of high status and power and who are in a position to reward us (Berscheid and Walster, 1978). Yet we dislike persons who verbally proclaim their worth and power. Nonverbal communication can be a non-offensive means of reminding others of power and status. Behaviors associated with dominance, power, and status include eye contact (even staring), relaxed but not slumped posture, expressive and expansive gestures, touch initiation, classic clothing and personal artifacts, expansive use of space, and poised, straightforward posture. New instructors, teaching assistants, and others less confident or experienced in their teaching, tend to behave in nonverbally submissive ways. Since many women are often socialized to be nonverbally submissive, they may profit from assertive nonverbal styles. Assertive behaviors signal the instructor's importance and credibility; students tend to respond appropriately. Thus, instructors perceived to have high power and status have less need for classroom control and are free to interact with students without fear of losing control and respect.

### Conclusion

Nonverbal communication is largely responsible for establishing relationships among persons in the classroom and elsewhere. This chapter describes how nonverbal behavior by instructors can directly alter teacher image and have an impact on student affect and learning. Through nonverbal messages, individuals signal how they feel towards each other. Instructors who generate high student affect not only improve their self-esteem, feel liked by their students, and receive higher student evaluations; they also generate more affective learning for the subject matter and their academic discipline. In the short run, higher affective learning enhances the popularity of the subject matter and increases student enrollments. In the long run, higher affect is the avenue to lifelong learning, more general support for education, and a better society. Thus, whether for pragmatic reasons such as increased student enrollments and increased funding, or for philosophical goals such as a better-educated society, the mechanisms that generate high student affect should remain a central concern. Nonverbal communication by instructors is a primary method of generating and sustaining student affect.

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