

# **CHAPTER VIII: THE NATURE OF CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION**

## 1. COMMUNICATION IN CLASSROOMS VS COMMUNICATION ELSEWHERE.

“who says what to whom, and with what effect” (Lasswell, 1964).

## 2. FUNCTIONS OF TALK: CONTENT, PROCEDURES, AND BEHAVIOR CONTROL

Classrooms are different from many other group situations in that communication serves a unique combination of three purposes at once: content, procedures, or behavior control (Wells, 2006).

**Content talk:** It focuses on *what* is being learned; Usually content talk relates in some obvious way to the curriculum or to current learning objectives.

- a) **Procedural talk:** as its name implies, is about administrative rules or routines needed to accomplish tasks in a classroom.
- b) **Control talk:** It is about preventing or correcting misbehaviors when they occur, particularly when the misbehaviors are not because of ignorance of procedures.

## 3. VERBAL, NONVERBAL, AND UNINTENDED COMMUNICATION

- a) **Verbal communication:** It is a message or information expressed in words, either orally or in writing. Classrooms obviously have lots of verbal communication; it happens every time a teacher explains a bit of content, asks a question, or writes information or instructions on the chalkboard.
- b) **Non-verbal communications:** They are gestures or behaviors that convey information, often simultaneously with spoken words.
- c) **Unintended communications:** They are the excess meanings of utterances; they are the messages received by students without the teacher’s awareness or desire.

## 4. STRUCTURES OF PARTICIPATION: EFFECTS ON COMMUNICATION

Here are some of the most common:

- **Lecturing**—the teacher talks and students listen. Maybe students take notes, but maybe not.
- **Questions and answers**—the teacher asks a series of questions, calling on one student at a time to answer each of them. Students raise their hands to be recognized and give answers that

are brief and “correct”. In earlier times this participation structure was sometimes called recitation.

- **Discussion**—the teacher briefly describes a topic or problem and invites students to comment on it. Students say something relevant about the topic, but also are supposed to respond to previous speakers if possible.
- **Group work**—the teacher assigns a general task, and a small group of students work out the details of implementing it. The teacher may check on the group’s progress before they finish, but not necessarily.

## 5. HOW TEACHERS TALK

Although teacher talk varies somewhat with the tasks or purposes at hand, it also has uniformities that occur across a range of situations. Each strategy simultaneously influences the course of discussion and focuses students’ attention, and in these ways also helps indirectly to insure appropriate classroom behavior:

- **Nominating, terminating, and interrupting speakers:** Teachers often choose who gets to speak.
- **Marking importance or irrelevance:** Teachers sometimes indicate that an idea is important. On the other hand, they sometimes also indicate that an idea is not crucial or important.
- **Signaling boundaries between activities:** Teachers declare when an activity is over and a new one is starting.
- **Asking “test” questions and evaluating students’ responses:** Teachers often ask test questions—questions to which they already know the answer. Then they evaluate the quality or correctness of the students’ answers.
  - **Exaggerated changes in pitch:** When busy teaching, teachers tend to exaggerate changes in the pitch of their voice—
  - **Careful enunciation:** In class teachers tend to speak more slowly, clearly, and carefully than when conversing with a friend.
  - **Formal vocabulary and grammar:** Teachers tend to use vocabulary and grammar that is more formally polite and correct, and that uses relatively few slang or casual expressions.

## 6. HOW STUDENTS TALK

- **Agenda enforcement:** Sometimes students interrupt a discussion to ask about or remind others, and especially the teacher, of an agreed-on agenda.
- **Digression attempts:** During a discussion or activity, a student asks a question or makes a statement that is not relevant to the task at hand. While the teacher is leading students in a discussion of a story that they read
- **Side talk:** One student talks to another student, either to be sociable or to get information needed for the current assigned task.
- **Calling out:** A student speaks out of turn without being recognized by the teacher. The student's comment may or may not be relevant to the ongoing task or topic, and the teacher may or may not acknowledge or respond to it.
- **Answering a question with a question:** Instead of answering a teacher's "test" question directly, the student responds with a question of her own, either for clarification or as a stalling tactic ("Do you mean X?"). Either way, the effect is to shift the discussion or questioning to content or topics that are safer and more familiar.
- **Silence:** The student says nothing in response to a speaker's comments or to an invitation to speak.
- **Eye contact, gaze aversion, and posture:** The student looks directly at the teacher while the teacher is speaking, or else deliberately averts gaze. The student may also adopt any variety of postures while sitting (sit up straight vs slouching).

## 7. HELPING STUDENTS TO ARTICULATE THEIR IDEAS AND THINKING

In general any communication strategy will help students become more articulate if it both allows and invites further comment and elaboration on their ideas.

The teacher asks the student to explain his initial idea more completely.

- The teacher rephrases a comment made by a student.
- The teacher compares the student's idea to another, related idea, and asks the student to comment.
- The teacher asks for evidence supporting the student's idea.

- The teacher asks the student how confident he is in his idea.
- The teacher asks another student to comment on the first student's idea.

## **8. PROMOTING ACADEMIC RISK-TAKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING**

- Where possible, call attention to the intrinsic interest or satisfaction of an activity.
- Minimize the importance of grades where possible.
- Make sure students know that they have ample time to complete an activity.
- Show that you value unusual ideas and elegant solutions to problems.

Because communication in classrooms is more complex and unpredictable than in many other situations, it is important for teachers to understand its unique features and functions. It is helpful to think of classroom communication as serving a mixture of three purposes at once: content talk, procedural talk, and behavior control talk. It is also helpful to recognize that classroom communication has elements that are not only verbal, but also nonverbal and unintended.

To be effective in using verbal communication, teachers need to use appropriate instructional strategies related to content, such as using advance organizers, relating new information to prior knowledge, and organizing new information on behalf of students. It includes strategies that assist students to communicate, such as inquiry learning and cooperative learning. To communicate well about procedures and about the behaviors expected of students, teachers need a variety of management techniques.

To be effective in using nonverbal communication, teachers need to use appropriate eye contact, allow ample wait time between speaking turns, and be aware of the effects of social distance on students. Structures of participation influence communication by facilitating particular patterns of speaking and listening, while at the same time making other patterns less convenient or disapproved. Four common participation structures are

lectures, questions-and- answers, classroom discussions, and group work.