



Words Matter: The Art of Effective Classroom Communication

SPEAKERS

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Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. This episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Online Conference. Join us from the comfort of your own home and transform how you teach with nationally recognized teaching and learning presenters. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Communication in the classroom matters, whether it's verbal communication or nonverbal, how and what you say - or don't say - directly impacts your teaching and your students' learning. For instance, something as simple as the placement of a pause can completely alter your intended message. If I say, "Let's eat grandpa," or "Let's eat, grandpa," those have two totally different meanings. Now, this is a more humorous example, but communication mishaps aren't always funny. So today, we're going to provide you with techniques to help strengthen your communication in the classroom and with your students. We will explore what students consider as communication misfires in the classroom. We'll cover different forms of communication that can help facilitate student learning, and then we'll dive into communication techniques for the online classroom, because we've definitely learned these past few years that online communication is not easy. To start, Jennifer Waldeck will address the role of communication in teaching excellence in this program.

Jennifer Waldeck 01:24

The importance of communication on teaching and learning is obvious. On one level, for students to learn we have to communicate, and for some instructors, helping students build knowledge is a matter of just delivery or transmission. The teacher disseminates it, and it's up to the students to absorb it and find ways to make sense out of it. These teachers consider themselves first and foremost as subject matter experts, and they operate by the philosophy that if I teach it, students will learn it. However, many of you probably know by now that this philosophy rarely leads to meaningful learning. Our knowledge is definitely valuable to our students, but no matter how much we know, there is no guarantee that will help them learn what we want them to learn. So my question is, to what extent do you truly value communication in your role as a teaching professor? And I don't just mean how much do you value the ability to speak well in front of your students or construct a good email. Those are the nuts and bolts of communicating well with your class, and they're necessary, but they're insufficient for

achieving really important student outcomes. So instead, I'm asking you to think about your willingness to communicate with students in ways that motivate them, make them want to talk with you in and outside of class, make them want to talk with each other. Encourage them to like your class, prompt them to look for ways to apply what they learn in other areas of their lives, and encourage them to appreciate your content, and even lead them to like you. Now, some of you may already be thinking, Oh, it doesn't matter if they like me, they need to respect me. Or I teach a really hard tedious class. No one likes accounting or statistics or calculus, liking, appreciation, and positive attitudes are all nice for these teachers, but unnecessary for delivering instruction. However, students positive affect, or how much they really enjoy learning and your class, value your content, see a use for your content outside of class, and even how they feel about you, is a critical means to the end we all look for in our classes, no matter what the topic is. In fact, researchers have established that affect actually plays a causal role between instructor communication and cognitive learning - the scholarly intellectual gains we want our students to make. So in other words, for students to learn, they have to experience positive affect. And the teacher's communication behavior is what shapes that positivity. One place to start is by looking at how you use communication to manage the learning experience. Educational psychologists tell us that classroom management involves minimizing distractions and maximizing student time on task. Overall, it's teaching in an efficient way that keeps students focused and engaged. Now communication research shows us how to use messages and interactions with students to do this well, to keep students focused build organizing language into your teaching. For example, you can use prompts that tell students what you want them to do at any given time during your class. Previews of what's coming, transitional statements that mark the movement from one major concept or activity to another, and posts that signal where you are in your plan for the day. If you've told students you're covering three major topics, let them know first, second, and third. These things really help students stay focused and engaged with your material instead of Instagram or Facebook. You can also use motivational statements to maintain student focus, something like "Now I know this part of the lesson is a bit detailed and kind of tedious, but mastering this is really going to pay off so let's keep at it." Now although there are many communication variables that help contribute to student learning, for now, we'll touch on one final form of communication that helps facilitate student learning. To this point, we focused on teacher communication. However, you probably know that teachers don't control all of the action when it comes to student learning. The research shows us that the communication students have with one another is very important as well. So think about what you're doing to promote classroom connectedness. What are you doing to encourage students to interact with one another in cooperative and supportive ways? When students feel connected, all kinds of great things happen. In comparison to students in less connected classes, they develop more friendships, they enjoy their time in class more, they talk about the class with one another in and out of class. They're considerate, they participate more, and they're less nervous about speaking up. And bottom line is they learn more. Interestingly, the benefits that arise from their relationships with one another seem to extend to us as well. Students in connected classes rate their teachers more favorably, cooperate with teacher requests, and are more motivated to talk with their teachers in class and during office hours. So the question becomes, What can teachers do to encourage positive peer to peer communication? First, you should model the kind of warmth and connection that you want your students to establish with one another. Be supportive and encourage students to be supportive of one another. For example, I require student presentations in most of my classes, and that creates a lot of anxiety for some people. So even though I don't mind when students use their tablets, and laptops when I teach, I insist that everyone put their devices away during student

presentations. Second, give your students lots of opportunities to work together during class. And the sooner the term the better. Although you should be giving them a task to focus on, relax a little bit and allow for some off-task talk, because this helps students build the kind of rapport that we're talking about here.

Tierney King 08:05

Additionally, it's important to know what students dislike most when it comes to teaching behaviors and communication. You can be on the lookout for demotivating and counterproductive behaviors that you weren't aware of in this program, How Can I Avoid Communication Misfires with Students?

Jennifer Waldeck 08:20

Of course, you've heard of student misbehaviors, but did you know that teachers misbehave, even the very best master teachers? A long line of research has investigated what college students don't like about what their teachers say and do. It turns out that college professors often, and sometimes without even realizing it, communicate in disagreeable, antisocial, and unlikable ways. Even nice teachers are sometimes boring and disorganized. And students report that some of us sometimes seem aloof, lazy, or even worse. I don't know about you, but none of that is how I want my students to experience me. You're probably thinking but that's not me. However, remember, from time to time, we all misbehave and are unaware of it, or circumstances may make some of these things unavoidable. And when you hear the list of misbehaviors in a few minutes, you may be surprised to learn that some common ways teachers communicate and act with students made the list things many of us do without even thinking. In fact, things you may believe are just what teachers do. There are three major categories of behavior that college instructors should try to avoid. The first category focuses on incompetent and ineffective teaching. What do students label as incompetent and ineffective? Some examples include things like confusing, unclear or disorganized lectures, going over material too quickly and making it difficult to take notes, overloading students with information in too short a time period, having a speaking style that is boring or monotone, being hesitant or ineffective in the way we answer our students questions, being out of touch with what's culturally relevant to our students, giving outdated examples. For example, not being able to talk about the music, the film, the television, or the other current trends that our students are interested in. The second category of teaching misbehaviors is concerned with the things we say and do that leads students to believe that we're apathetic, aloof to them, or maybe even lazy. Examples of what researchers call indolence include behaviors like being absent from class for any reason, even attending important conferences, for example, tardiness to class or starting class late. For example, because we're talking to a student at the front of the room. Seeming unprepared or disorganized, forgetting due dates, or neglecting to collect assignments or homework that students have spent time on. The final type of teacher communication that students really object to, for obvious reasons, is offensive and antagonistic. Examples include things like belittling or embarrassing students, being sarcastic, and that's a tough one for some professors, because it's just some people's personality style, but we have to be really careful. Yelling, arguing with students versus debating them or challenging their thinking, telling them that their opinions are wrong, showing favoritism or prejudice. Certainly things like sexual harassment, being moody or impatient with our students. And now this is an interesting one that students report, but teachers who are technophobic, that ban or regulate laptops and tablets in class or refuse to communicate online with students. Another misbehavior that falls into this category is when we fail to respond to student calls or emails, when we're inaccessible outside of

class. So I'm often asked, do my students always notice when I misbehave? Do they ever cut me any slack? And unfortunately, the answers tend to be yes, and not really. An interesting series of studies indicated that students are pretty unforgiving of our misbehaviors. And they typically assume that reasons for our misbehavior are related to these internal causes, like our character, our intelligence, our work ethic, rather than external causes. In other words, in their minds, we misbehave because we're not that smart or lazy, or we're uncaring. Not because we have other students other responsibilities, car problems, or even because we're sick. In other words, students don't apply the same explanations for what we do that we might give. Instead, they assume the worst. So the bottom line is, they do notice when we misbehave, and the differences between teachers who misbehave and don't misbehave, come out in teacher ratings, and also student learning. So now that you know what types of teacher misbehaviors exist, and what behaviors can work against student liking and learning, my first recommendation is that you avoid them. Be clear, be caring, develop your teaching competence. Don't sacrifice student perceptions of your approachability and your caring and some effort to create a super rigorous course and be strict. When you know you've committed a misbehavior. Give students a reasonable explanation. For example, I travel for professional reasons, sometimes quite a bit, and so I explain my activities to my students, and if I'm traveling to give a talk, I'll practice it with them. They give me some of the best feedback and it makes them feel special. It goes a long way toward minimizing any frustration they might feel when I'm absent. It's also important to apologize to students. And this can be very hard for some professors, but when you sincerely apologize, you're telling your students that they matter, and this does wonders for promoting their commitment to your class.

Tierney King 14:34

Lastly, communication is just as important in your online courses as it is for your in-person classes. In this program, What are the Communication Musts in an Online Class? Jill Schiefelbein explains how you can enhance your online education communication.

Jill Schiefelbein 14:50

When you start out teaching an online course, and quite frankly, I suggest this for hybrid courses as well, you want to have two key videos. The first is instructor introduction video. And the second is a course expectation video. So these are the starting videos. And what you want to do with this is really set the tone for your course. In the instructor introduction, you're going to, well, introduce yourself. But I don't want you to do this in a boring way. Yes, you need to state some credentials. But more importantly, you need to build credibility and a connection with your students. You need to have that personality shine through. If you can't already tell, I'll make mistakes, I'm a little goofy, it's fine. I don't worry about that. What I care is that first and foremost, I'm communicating in a way that's clear for you to understand this material. And the next is I'm communicating in a way that really shows my genuine passion and enthusiasm for this topic. And my real desire that you learn and take this and implement it. Most of us as teachers, we have that passion, that desire for our students. But oftentimes in online classes, we aren't communicating that well. So that's what your instructor introduction should do. Of course, you can give some credentials, but give them in stories. So for example, if I were to make a new video right now, for an online course, let's say some university said, "Wow, we want you to teach an online course, and we're going to pay you and we want you to take time away from your business to do it." And I say yes, here's exactly what my instructor introduction would sound like. And for sake of demonstration, we're going to pretend that this is a business communication course, because that's

what I used to teach. Hey, everyone, my name is Jill Schiefelbein, and I'm going to be your instructor for this communication and business course. Now, I could tell you all these things about me, but quite frankly, you could Google my name and find out most of them. Here's what you most need to know, in order to understand how I'm going to be teaching you this semester. See, we're going to be in this online course together, and while we're doing it, there may be some times that you feel disconnected because we're not physically meeting in-person. Those are the times where you need to reach out and communicate with me or to your fellow students. I firmly believe that we can build a super meaningful connection online, in fact, maybe even one that's more connected than you may experience face-to-face, because you don't get the same one-on one-time with that instructor. So if you need help, ask. If you have a question, ask. If you need assistance, ask. You get the trend here? I genuinely mean it. Because my goal in this course is to take everything that I've done in the academic space, and everything I've done in my business and with my clients, and to combine them together to make this the best learning experience that I can for you. Now, some of the things that I'll be bringing into this are stories about my experiences. Now, I don't do this to brag, but I do it so that you know that this stuff happens outside of the classroom. I'm a live stream personality for Entrepreneur Magazine, one of the biggest magazines about business in the country. And I am honored to take on that role. And when I do I get to talk to some people who are far smarter than me. I'm going to bring those lessons to you in this class. I'm going to take my writing that I do for magazines, for other blogs, for podcasts, and combine them with what I know is a fundamental theory and research that really makes people tick. And combined, we're gonna work together so that your understanding of these concepts is not just regurgitated from the textbook, but that you know how to apply them in the world, in your job and in your life. All right, so you know a little bit about me, I'll be giving more hints throughout the semester. But I can't wait to get to know you. And hopefully we'll have a great connection and exchange throughout the course. All right, I didn't pre-script that, I didn't do anything ahead of this. I didn't even know I was going to do that actually. But you see, the point is it was real. It was in the moment, it was genuine. I repeated myself a couple of times. It's okay. You watch that video that I just demonstrated instead of "Hi, my name is Jill and I'm gonna be your instructor for Comm 259 this semester. I've been teaching at Arizona State University for 11 years and running my business for six full-time for only two but the other ones were on the side. Now I work in this space and I do this. I've written this book, I published this, I write for a magazine and I do this. I'm looking forward to being your teacher this semester." That doesn't do anything. Your students are not going to feel connected, they're not going to feel engaged. The instructor introduction video is not about reporting your credentials. It's about building rapport with your students and genuinely connecting with them. Now you see the difference. Last but not least, is the genuine connection. And this is so important. As I've hopefully demonstrated throughout this, I genuinely want you to use these tips to better impact your students. You have so much knowledge and information to share. Sometimes it's just not shared in the best possible way and especially if you're new to online teaching this environment is crazy. You have to get to know a whole other teaching style. Those of us who have been there we have gone through it too. But when you really focus on through all of this communication it's not just dotting your I's and crossing your T's, but really making a genuine connection with your students. That's when you're going to see so much success. I will never forget a time where I asked my students for feedback, not for my teaching, but for a project I was doing. I actually was giving a keynote. And this was back in 2012, I had about 400 students across three different online courses at the time. And while I was teaching, I thought, Wow, this keynote is about really bringing the human touch to online education. So why don't I asked my

students how they feel connected? How they like communication? How they want to be interacted with in online courses? Well, I did. I didn't offer any extra credit. I didn't offer any incentive, but I told them "Hey, guys, now of course, I've done all these things that I've been telling you about so far...I have this opportunity to give this keynote to a few 100 faculty members who are going to be teaching online courses. I think I have a feeling of what students want from online instructors, but I don't know everything. You want to share what you want? What do you like about the communication style in this course? What do you not like? What have other instructors done better? What would you like to see? Post these answers and I'll share as many as I can in this keynote." Well, to my surprise, 65% of my students for no incentive whatsoever, gave commentary. And later when I posted that keynote, an hour presentation, I had 20% of my students, on their own time, watch that video and respond - both watch and respond to it by a personal email. You can't tell me if someone's willing to take an hour of time for an assignment that's not mandatory that you haven't made a connection. It was a huge lesson to me then. And ever since that point, I've taken my rigid credentialing and bulleted lists out of the teaching. Of course, you need them for instructions, but you don't need them when you're getting to know your students. So find a way to get your personality in the course. Make those genuine connections and show students how you're living, what you're teaching outside of the classroom. Do those things and you'll find a way to communicate to students like you haven't done before, and you'll see how they communicate with you in return.

Tierney King 22:15

Whether you're driving to work, or you just did a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Livepodcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode Description.