



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Improving Classroom Communication

The teacher's life, however fulfilled, however stimulating, has days R. J. Yeatman must have been thinking about when he wrote, "For every person wanting to teach, there are at least 30 not wishing to be taught." Students sometimes fall asleep in class, read the campus newspaper instead of the lecture outline, talk when they should be quiet, refuse to speak up when they should, and respond to the instructor's most profound ideas with, "Is this going to be on the test?"

When the worst of times invade the best of times, or when the mysterious slump pervades days or weeks of classroom interaction, we tend to oversimplify causes. It's either our fault or it's the students' fault; and if everyone would only try harder, things would be perfect. In our more lucid moments, we acknowledge the complex of factors which may be operating in concert to sabotage course objectives, realizing that a bad day might be the consequence of a particularly difficult course topic, the aftermath of a treacherous exam, the morning after spring break, rampant flu virus, or the malfunctioning air conditioning. Still, the evaluation of our teaching effectiveness often proceeds in a more or less random fashion with little in the way of systematic examination on making weak classroom communication better or successful interaction even more effective.

Elements of Proof

One way of scrutinizing communication effectiveness is to think of classroom presentation as a collection of "proofs." Each of us has available three types of proof to use in persuading students to understand, accept, and/or act on the ideas we present. This three-part conception of the speaker's potential means of persuasion was detailed in Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* and remains applicable these many centuries later. Perhaps its greatest merit lies in acknowledging the sometimes undervalued role played by the second and third elements of proof.

Logos, the first type of proof, consists of logical reasoning backed up by factual/expert opinion evidence. When we think of the substance of a lecture or discussion topic, we are most likely thinking of *logos*.

A logical unit of proof contains three elements: something claimed or asserted, something to back up this claim, and something in the middle to provide the inferential link between the claim and the evidence—i.e., the reasoning. Although there are cases in which the reasoning may be self-evident and not explicitly stated, the evidence should be presented along with the claim. Otherwise, of course, what we have is just an assertion or what someone once called "a vagrant opinion with no visible means of support."

This is an area to consider carefully, if only because of the complacency we develop over time about our subject matter. When a course concept has been covered again and again over a span of many years, the temptation to regard it as common knowledge grows. It is so firmly embedded in our own academic repertoire that we lose sight of the student for whom the idea is brand new and may be received as something fresh and exciting or something vague and unsubstantiated.

Pathos, or "emotional" proofs, form the second element of proof. Emotion seems more traditionally viewed as an irrelevance, even an impediment to instruction, rather than the benefit it actually is. Some of us do a disservice to ourselves and our students by submerging emotion so effectively in the name of scholarship and dignity that we imbue our subjects with sterility. We are too afraid to laugh, to show unhappiness, to exult in the frequently exciting aspects of our work—to have fun in the classroom. "Star Trek's" Mr. Spock, with his calculating Vulcan side tempered by his more vulnerable earthling side, is an instructive example of the power of emotion as well as logic in compelling interest and acceptance.

Ethos is the third element of proof. The credibility of the speaker held in the minds of the listeners is the most powerful of the three types of proof we use to advance our ideas. It is, ironically, the least credited of the three in terms of its power to attract or repel student interests. No matter how brilliantly a class session may be structured and no matter how much the instructor chews on the scenery while presenting it, if the person expressing the ideas is regarded as incompetent, untrustworthy, and insincere, the message will not get



through. Emerson's often-quoted line expresses the idea succinctly: "What you are speaks so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying."

The three most significant dimensions of ethos are these:

Competence—The speaker who is perceived as poorly prepared, unable to explain the material clearly, and deficient in the necessary knowledge will cause listeners to turn away from the ideas presented.

Trustworthiness—Listeners must sense a well-meaning attitude toward them. The speaker must be seen as honest, sincere, and concerned about the welfare of the listeners.

Dynamism—Research conducted in speaker credibility suggests that modern-day audiences are more influenced by the speaker's energy level than by the other two ethical ingredients. While I would be hesitant to recommend that anyone cultivate an artificially frenetic classroom style, any instructor with an extremely low-key style of speaking is working twice as hard to get the information to its destination than the one who will do a little tap dancing.

Ideas for Improving Classroom Speaking Style

- Speak loudly, clearly, and at a rate that is comfortable to you and manageable for the students.
- If you use a lectern, avoid welding yourself to it. The speaker's stand should be used as an aid for holding class notes, not as a Barcalounger.
- Keep your eyes on the students. Watch for nonverbal, as well as verbal, feedback. Do they look perplexed, hostile, sleepy? Are they taking notes? Are they alert and interested?
- Never read lectures. It is agonizing for listeners.
- Speak from an outline rather than a manuscript.
- Use supplements (charts, graphs, drawings, models) when they might help you explain something.
- Encourage a friendly, open atmosphere where students will not be afraid to ask questions. Draw out the quiet ones without intimidating them. Try to monitor understanding. Rather than saying, "Everybody got that?" (to which everyone will nod obediently), ask a student to rephrase the idea, give an example, or raise a challenge.
- Move around while you are working in the classroom. Listeners are better able to maintain attention to aural stimulation if they are receiving simultaneous visual stimulation. Moving close to

students who are providing some sort of distraction in class will usually restore their attention.

- Look at yourself honestly and try to identify and correct distracting mannerisms. If facilities are available, have one of your class sessions videotaped and scrutinize the tape carefully, if possible, with a colleague whose judgment you respect. Do you: Fill pauses with "uhs" and "uhms"? Play with pencils, paper clips, rubber bands, and whatever else you find lying around in the classroom? Scratch your head? Play with your moustache? Twirl strands of hair? Repeat certain words or phrases so often that they become hallmarks of your style?
- Present yourself energetically and with all the confidence you deserve. All audiences—student or not—will generally invest about as much confidence in the speaker as the speaker seems to demand.
- Allow disagreement without being defensive. Students who are asking challenging questions are listening and thinking.
- Try not to let personal problems unduly influence the conduct of your class. Although students understand that we are human, too much intrusion from a negative mood dampens the overall atmosphere. The instructor's power to set the tone for everyone in the room is immense. To a large extent, playing the role of good cheer even when your outlook on the world is momentarily bleak, holds the personal distraction at bay. The act becomes, for as long as it is necessary, the reality.
- Enter your classroom with optimism and good will toward your students. Treat them with respect rather than patronizing them.

Janice Peterson, Assistant Professor, Communication

For further information, contact the author at Santa Barbara City College, 721 Cliff Drive, Santa Barbara, CA 93109-2394.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

November 10, 1989, Vol. XI, No. 27
©The University of Texas at Austin, 1989
Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER
institutions for their own personnel.

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for \$40 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and once during the summer. ISSN 0199-106X.