

# INDIVIDUALIZING CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

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Ethan is joy. He enjoys each aspect of his life with his whole being. He gives joy to those near him. His joy is contagious.

But will something happen to Ethan as it does to us all? Where will his joy go? In most of us it becomes depleted, distorted, contorted. Guilt and fear begin to defile it. Somehow the joy of Ethan goes, never to fully return.<sup>1</sup>

—William C. Schutz

AND what do schools have to do with this phenomenon? In what ways are we, Ethan's teachers, responsible for his loss of joy? And, furthermore, do we care?

We spend a great deal of time as educators talking about "motivation" and "individualization" and "individual differences" and on and on. Yet we do so little that is simple or logical to bring real meaning to these abstract terms. Let us look at some ideas regarding classroom communications and the individualization of instruction. The value of the ideas rests in the applications which teachers might make rather than in the ideas themselves.

We kid ourselves when we talk about motivating pupils. Motivation is a personal thing—an internal dimension of an individual. Teachers cannot motivate pupils; they can only provide environments conducive to self-motivation. However, one crucial aspect of the environmental setting of the

classroom is the communication established between teachers and pupils.

Again, let us not kid ourselves when we consider classroom communications. It is the teacher who is primarily responsible for the type, direction, and content of most of these communications.

The institutions we call schools, by the nature of their existence, organization, and functions, create expectations about the functions and roles of those who inhabit them. This is to say that the community has expectations about the roles of teachers; administrators have expectations about teachers; teachers have expectations about themselves; and even pupils have very precise expectations about their teachers. Some of these expectations focus on the teacher as the authority figure in the classroom and on the teacher as initiator of communication. A great deal of theory and research supports this viewpoint.

## A Learned Ability

"Who says what to whom how and with what effect?" That is the question framed almost 30 years ago by those engaged in the analysis of human communication. Obvi-

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Schutz. *Joy*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967.



### **where is prejudice?**

***In a specially arranged workshop, twelve college students of varied racial and religious backgrounds were brought together to test their common conviction that they were not prejudiced. At the end of one week of discussion and informal activity, the group's complacency was gone. For some, the encounter resulted in apprehension and concern about the deep-seated character of prejudice. A few came to reveal a basic bigotry that was not evident at first. For everyone involved, the workshop became far more than an academic exercise as the students confronted their underlying feelings and each other.***

The week-long confrontation took place at Cape Ann, Massachusetts, under the direction of Dr. Max Birnbaum, director of the Human Relations Laboratory, Boston University. The resulting film was compiled from different sessions throughout the week. The group of students included Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Negroes, Orientals, and Caucasians. Produced by National Educational Television.

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ously the communication channels used in face-to-face interactions are the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the participants. And as McLuhan suggests, the "medium" is sometimes the "message." We have a communication problem when we assume that meanings are in words rather than people.

As long as teacher and pupil face each other in the classroom, verbal behaviors *probably* will be an essential aspect of their communications, but nonverbal behaviors and entirely nonverbal communication events persist. When two people come together in a given place at a given time, facial expressions, gestures, actions, positions, appearances, vocal characteristics (when the voice is used), and the very use of space and time itself gain meaning. Messages, intended or otherwise, are sent and received.

It is in light of these facts that we need to examine the teaching-learning process and particularly the individualization of that process to meet the needs of every learner.

We tend to make some frightening as-

sumptions about teaching. First, we assume that to teach is to communicate. But communication is a complex process, its successful completion dependent upon each of its components: sender, channel, message, and receivers.

Anthropologists tell us that the ability to interpret (receive) human communications is a learned ability which may never be fully mastered but improves with cumulative experience. Sociologists tell us that we manage our nonverbal behaviors in keeping with our self-expectations and our perceptions of our roles. And psychological research indicates that the receiver in the communication process always looks to nonverbal cues as being "real" or "truthful" whenever there is discrepancy between the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the communicator. Our assumption is less than adequate.

A second assumption that we teachers often make is that to teach is to be verbal. Whoever heard of a silent teacher? How often have we (as teachers) become con-

cerned when silence reigns for 30 seconds or more during an "important" lesson? What does it mean to be a "teacher," a "facilitator," or a "learning-guide," if we take away the power to talk? Can a mute person teach?

It often appears that we go even further than this second assumption. We seem to assume that the teacher's role is not only to talk but to *send* verbal messages. After all, are we not supposed to provide information, to give directions, to encourage students and praise them and ask them questions?

Yet the individualizing, personalizing facet of teaching lies outside the realm of teacher-initiated communication, outside the realm of teacher verbalization, beyond the scope of teacher message-sending. The individualization of instruction as it pertains to classroom interaction lies in the role of the teacher as a *receiver* of messages, verbal and nonverbal.

We do not spend enough time paying attention to the messages being sent us by pupils. Often we do not "hear" the verbal messages as our minds click like computers considering classroom discipline, the reports due in the principal's office, and what direction to take during the next five minutes of class or even during the next verbal interchange. And we are even less aware of the nonverbal messages which each pupil is sending us whether or not we have actively engaged him in verbal interaction.

## Nonverbal Messages

We have probably given little thought to the types of nonverbal messages pupils send, because we have failed to understand how we might use these cues to the advantage of individual learners.

If we assemble some rather rough categorizations of pupil nonverbal expressions, perhaps their value to the classroom teacher may become clearer:

1. *Expressions of Need:* The need to participate, the need to be noticed, the need to be accepted. Pupils exhibit their needs in various ways, most of them nonverbal, because they learn very early in the game we call "school" that personal needs are not to be given public

verbal expression. However, need expressions do develop common forms and formats and even hierarchical arrangements. Consider Galloway's report<sup>2</sup> of the teacher who discovered that pupils in her elementary classroom displayed differing degrees of the need to participate in the manner in which they "raised their hands" and with the nonverbal behaviors which accompanied their "hand-waving." Facial expressions, eye contact, movements, and body positions tell us much about pupils' personal needs.

2. *Expressions of Anxiety:* These expressions broadly include emotional concern, defensiveness, defiance, and hostility. Most children begin school with much less anxiety than they will show later in their junior high and high school years. Schools do much to make people anxious. We as teachers and administrators are often unaware of the situations and encounters which produce anxiety. More significantly, we fail to notice the nonverbal cues which point out the presence of anxiety. Like the proverbial "bull in the china shop," we ignore the storm warnings, and force our goals and expectations on the learner at the wrong times and in the wrong ways.

Recently a teacher aide in a rural elementary school in Tennessee provided an apt but heart-rending illustration of the problem. She mentioned that early in her paraprofessional experience she had been observing the classroom teacher working with a reading group. These children had been asked to read a story about a boy and his dog. The teacher was now attempting to assess, through a series of oral questions, their comprehension of the story. She began by addressing a question to Jimmy, who failed to respond. The teacher probed a bit further and tried several other questions, all to no avail. Finally in frustration and some anger, she turned her attention to another child.

Throughout the interchange between the teacher and Jimmy, the aide had been able to observe Jimmy closely. She detected in his facial expressions, his postures, and other nonverbal behaviors signs of apparent anxiety. A little later, the aide made it a point to spend some time with Jimmy. She casually turned their conversation to dogs and soon found that Jimmy had owned a dog himself until a week

<sup>2</sup> Charles M. Galloway. *Teaching Is Communicating*. Pre-publication draft of a bulletin prepared for the Association for Student Teaching, March 1970.

earlier when his father, angered at the amount of food consumed by the animal, had forced Jimmy to shoot his pet.

3. *Expressions of Boredom*: How many lessons could have been learned, how many learners could have been saved, if only we had noticed the messages of growing disinterest and sheer boredom! Even though it is difficult for me to imagine that any student could be less excited about English or geometry or reading than I am, a natural suspicion of my own effectiveness and a constant search in the faces and postures of my students for the signs of my negative impact may be two of my most useful teaching tools.

Not long ago, a time lapse photographic study of interactions in a high school social studies class yielded some interesting information. Most noticeable to any observer of the 80-odd photographs produced during the 45-minute class period were the changes in postures of most students as the class progressed. As the lecturer droned on and boredom set in, students slumped lower and lower in their seats. At the final bell, some students were hardly discernible above their desk tops, but apparently the teacher was oblivious to the scene before him.

4. *Expressions of Involvement*: When are students in my classroom "turned on"? They probably will not tell me, but their nonverbal cues give them away. Sometimes we are so busy looking for negative expressions that we fail to note the positive ones. Yet these are the cues which can do most to help us improve our teaching. If I can only identify that instant, however fleeting, when Jimmy really expressed interest and excitement and joy in learning *something*, perhaps I can recreate the experience, reuse the technique, rechannel lesson content. Perhaps I can develop a more appropriate learning environment for Jimmy.

5. *Expressions of Verbal Substitution*: A junior high school student comes running down the hall. There is a rule against running. So in your role as teacher, you stop him, remind him of the rule, and chastise him a bit. Perhaps you end the lecture with a question, "What do you have to say for yourself, young man?" Our student's response is typical. With hands in pockets and eyes on the floor, he shrugs his shoulders.

Fine, you say! He got the point! And you send him on his way. But it is *you* who missed the point. Why didn't our mis-adventurer respond verbally? That is easy! He knew that *anything* he said would be used against him. So, he used a substitute expression.

In human communication, we all substitute the nonverbal for the verbal at times, but teachers can learn so much about their interactions with students, about the students, and about themselves by noting the use of substitute expressions. When does the student "substitute"? Why does he feel the need to substitute? Are my communications unclear? Have I put him in a "box" from which there is no verbal escape? Is it merely easier to substitute the nonverbal for the verbal at this point?

Obviously, the categorizations we have created are primitive, and perhaps they are not even useful. Probably there are more and better ones, but at least these should have focused our attention on the value of changing our orientation toward teaching. If we are going to individualize instruction we must know the individual recipient well. We must gear our instruction to his needs, his goals, his learning styles. We must be aware at all times of the messages he is sending us. We must be more a *receiver* and less a *sender* of communication.

We are not enough aware of the potential inherent in teaching from a receiver orientation. We can provide more opportunity for and take more advantage of pupil communication of needs, grasp of content, and expression of feeling. Our roles as teachers can emphasize utilization of pupil experiences, interests, and emotions for building instruction. The reception strategy in teaching is not a new idea. It is the foundation of inquiry method, and in counseling, it is Rogers' non-directive approach. But we lose sight of the technique, the approach, the concept. We are just too busy sending messages, being verbal, moving interaction along as we wish. Is it any wonder that students are not motivated? Can we ever hope to individualize instruction unless we individualize our communication? □

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