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# THE INFLUENCE OF A TEACHER'S NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR ON STUDENTS' MOTIVATION

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***Abstract:*** *The paper investigates the way in which a teacher's non-verbal behaviour (i.e. my own behaviour) in class may influence students' motivation. The study is based on the analysis of anonymous feed-back provided by my students along a number of years. What their honest opinions reveal is that they pay a great deal of attention not only to the message itself but also to the way you convey a message. At the same time, they may help a teacher improve his/her teaching style in order to motivate students to attend classes.*

***Key words:*** *non-verbal behaviour, students' motivation, needs analysis, professional/personal development, learning environment.*

## 1. Introduction

Professional/personal development is part of the quality improvement process used in educational institutions. Successful professional development will benefit both students and teachers by improving the effectiveness of teaching, by raising achievement, by providing a systematic approach to training and development, and by enhancing job satisfaction.

***Development*** means change and growth. Teacher development is the process of becoming the best teacher that one can personally be. To the extent that teachers are regularly asking themselves 'How can I become a better teacher?' 'How can I enjoy teaching more?', 'How can I feel that I am helping learning?' they are thinking about ways of developing. They are acknowledging that it is possible to change the way they teach and perhaps also the preconceptions that they have about teaching and learning.

Teacher development draws on the teacher's own inner resource for change. It is centred on *personal awareness* of the possibilities for change, and of what influences the change process. It builds on the past, because recognizing how past experiences have or have not been developmental helps identify opportunities for change in the present and future. It also draws on the present, in encouraging a fuller awareness of the kind of teacher you are and of other people's responses to you. It is a *self-reflective process*, because it is through questioning old habits that alternative ways of being and doing are able to emerge.

Rossner, 1994 (quoted in Head and Taylor, 1997:2) mentions a couple of characteristics of teacher development among which the one that I found really relevant is the following: 'Teacher development is not just to do with (…) teaching: it's also about (…) counseling skills, assertiveness training, confidence-building, computing, meditation, cultural broadening – almost anything, in fact.'

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The present paper aims at showing how a teacher can develop as a result of the comments/suggestions provided by students with the aim of increasing their intrinsic motivation. The body of the paper consists in the analysis of some comments provided by my students in the end-of-term feed-back on my courses with respect to my non-verbal behaviour in the classroom.

## 2. Students' Motivation

As part of my teaching activity, at the end of each semester I ask my students to provide me with anonymous feed-back on the courses I teach. What I basically looked for in the feed-back were negative and positive aspects related to the course and seminars and suggestions for improvement. I have done this being aware that if the students' needs are fulfilled, they will be more motivated to take part in the lectures and seminar activities. One important conclusion is that the students are quite objective in depicting their lacks and wants. What has to be pointed out is that connections between different responses could constitute the basis for the teacher's future activity.

The multiple functions of the classroom context can be integrated into a dynamic process of validation-reconsideration directed towards the teaching/learning activities. The emphasis is on the learner's response and his/her role in evaluating current and selecting future materials/teaching techniques in accordance with the various criteria and expectations of those involved in the instructional context. The basic assumption is that the learners may develop the willingness, the means and the capacity to decide upon what kind of input and activities they would like to process, provided they are treated as active ***participants*** in a complex interaction and not as passive ***audience***.

Thus, I consider that the feed-back I get from my students could have positive consequences both in the following stages of the course with the same group of students (or for the groups to come), by better selecting the topics and adjusting the materials to the new realities, and in the long run by increasing the students' responsibility for their learning and developing their skills.

One other thing that needs to be underlined is that motivation does not exist as such, but is created by forces that act upon the students from outside the classroom (extrinsic motivation) and within the classroom (intrinsic motivation). Generally, students are highly extrinsically motivated and this is reflected in their choice of a particular faculty. But they are very little, or not at all, intrinsically motivated. In the learning process the students will be more successful if they have both kinds of motivation for the problem is that of supplying and increasing the intrinsic motivation. And this is the responsibility of the teacher who should pay attention to the following issues:

- to create and maintain a stimulating and challenging learning environment;
- to encourage students to take responsibility for, and be active in, their own learning;
- to set expectations that make appropriate demands on students.

## 3. Analysis of the Students' Comments on the Teacher's Non-Verbal Communication in the Classroom

The classroom is a veritable goldmine of non-verbal behaviour. Acceptance and understanding of ideas and feelings on the part of teacher and students, encouraging and criticizing, silence, questioning, etc. – all involve non-verbal elements. All teachers have encountered in their activity the 'frantic hand weaver' who is sure he

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has the answer, or the student who is sure he does not know the answer and tries to avoid eye contact with the teacher. Facial expressions, threatening gestures, and tone of voice are frequently used for discipline, not only in elementary school but also at higher-level education. A teacher's trust of his students is sometimes indicated by his/her arrangement of seating and his/her monitoring behaviour during examination. One should not forget the variety of techniques used by students to make *sleeping* appear to be *studying* or *listening*. Sometimes, the teacher–student interaction may be influenced/affected by the students' dress and hair length.

In what follows I will focus on non-verbal issues pertaining to the teacher, with special focus on my behaviour as pointed out to me by my students. The analysis will follow some of the non-verbal codes.

### 3.1. Kinesics[1] in the Classroom

a) *Facial expressions*. All people and thus certainly teachers and students use facial expressions to communicate attitudes related to the opinions they have of one another. A cold stare has long been in the repertoire of a teacher's weapons. Similarly, a smile can be a useful tool in reinforcing desired student behaviours.

A teacher can also use the students' facial expressions as valuable sources of feedback. Thus, when I deliver a lecture, I use my students' expressions to determine whether or not to slow down, speed up, or in some other way rephrase my presentation. The teacher, on the other hand, probably communicates more accidentally by his/her facial expression than by other means.

Here are some bits of information concerning my facial expression I gathered from my students. Since they are anonymous, I cannot indicate their exact source:

*'What I like about you is that you smile all the time, even if our class is at 7.30, when people are usually grumpy'.*

*'I didn't notice that you didn't feel well last week; it's because you always smile'.*

*'I hope you will keep the smile on your face on the day of our exam; this way we will think that the exam paper will be an easy one or that you will have mercy with us'.*

*'The fact that you smile all the time creates a friendly atmosphere and we don't feel afraid to answer your questions because we feel encouraged, even if we know that our answers are not the most correct ones'.*

What I have gathered from these short fragments is that a ***smile***, provided it is genuine, can create a friendly atmosphere which is a crucial factor in fostering education. If students felt threatened by the facial expressions of the teachers, most probably they would feel reluctant to interact with him/her in the educational process and also less keen on acquiring the knowledge transmitted by him/her.

Another element of the face that communicates a lot is the ***eye behaviour/gaze***. Eye behaviour seems to be of particular importance since it is generally used to indicate whether one is open to communication. This can be noticed when the teacher asks the students questions. Students who have the answer to the question will generally look at the teacher, while those who don't will try to avoid eye-contact.

In my activity I try to keep eye-contact with my students as much as possible. Here are some of their remarks:

*'I like that you don't read to us from books or pages, like other teachers, and that you look at us'.*

*'I know that it is difficult to remember all our names, but when you look at us for an answer, especially if we sit at the back of the classroom, we don't know exactly who*

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*you are looking at and thus whom you expect to speak.'*

*'I'm a shy person and I don't like talking in front of the others, especially if I am not confident that I know the answer. When you look at me waiting for an answer, I panic and feel so stupid.'*

Both positive and negative aspects are revealed concerning eye-contact with my students. On the one hand they feel that they get my attention equally, that I don't favour some over the others. On the other hand, they brought to my attention the fact that sometimes I am too insistent and that this might de-motivate especially the less confident students and make them feel embarrassed. So, what I have to do in the future is to try to find a way of encouraging such students to interact with me but not necessarily by prolonging my gaze with them. Also worth taking into account is the other negative comment, namely that the students cannot figure out whom I am addressing. I really do not know if there is a solution to this, since I usually lecture around 60 or 70 students and sometimes even more. The farther away they are from me, the less accurate the direction of my gaze towards a particular student seems to become. But a bit of confusion, now and then, may bring a touch of cheerfulness to the class, a moment of fun in the serious activity of teaching.

b) *Gestures* represent another element of body movement (kinesics). A modern definition of gesture is provided by Tenjes' (1996:164): '*a gesture is a hand movement accompanying speech and acquiring its meaning in a context of conversation or possessing a language independent meaning*'.

Two comments emerged from my students' feed-back concerning my gesturing:

*'The way you smile and use your hands when you teach shows that you love what you teach and that you try to make us understand it and like it as much as you do. Your gestures seem to indicate that the subject is a piece of cake, but when I go home and read my notes, it's not as easy as it seems in the class.'*

'*Sometimes you move your hands so much that I tend to focus on your rings and lose track of what you are telling us'.*

I have to admit that I was not aware of my excessive gesturing, either in a positive or in a negative way, but I tend to think that the hand gestures I use are meant to underline/enhance the idea I am expressing while teaching. It may happen that for some students these repeated movements of my hands can become distracting, so I have to try and control them as much as I can. Some gestures that I am aware of during the teaching process, and for which I sometimes apologize (although they have not been mentioned) are folding my arms across the chest and placing one of my hands on the hip. I adopt these two positions while listening to my students. Both are defensive positions. The former may be misinterpreted by the students either as reluctance on my behalf to interact with them or as a sign that their message is not correct. The second gesture is not very lady-like and may be interpreted as lack of interest/of involvement on behalf of the listener. When a listener folds his/her arms, s/he not only is more critical about the speaker, but at the same time s/he pays less attention to what the speaker is talking about. Since I apologize and explain that I find these positions relaxing taking into account that I never sit while teaching, the students have never perceived them as 'hostile gestures'.

c) *Body posture* may also communicate a certain message, as I have been made aware by a student who wrote *'We cannot see your smile when you write on the board*.' This piece of information made me

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realize that the back represents the non-communicative part of our body. It also made me aware that a solution to this problem may be the use of modern devices (i.e. laptop+ projector). But unfortunately, this could come true only when teachers of our faculty don't have to 'commute' from one building to another. But even so, a comment like the one above may motivate any teacher to start using modern technology.

d) *Head nods*, as kinesic elements, may convey different messages, depending on the gender of the sender. According to Maltz and Borker (2007), women are more involved than men in maintaining social interaction and they also do more in order to facilitate the flow of conversation. Consequently they encourage responses from their interlocutors, often using backchannel sounds like 'mm hmm' or nodding their heads. Gumperz (1977) shows that a minimal response such as a head nod means different things for men and women. Thus, for a woman a nod may indicate a simple message like *I'm listening to you, please continue*. For men, the same message has a stronger meaning such as *I agree with you* or at least *I follow your argument so far*. I think that because of the fact that my students experienced both messages in their previous education, as they had both male and female teachers, they felt a bit confused at my nodding while I was listening to their opinions. Consequently, in one feed-back paper I encountered the following short comment:

'*Whenever you ask us something and we answer your question you keep nodding and smiling at us. We can't possibly always give the correct answer but you give us the feeling that we are right in what we say. Is that really so?'*

I received this comment about four years ago. Since then, I have tried to avoid any misunderstanding or confusion triggered by my head nods by commenting on the answers the students provided, emphasizing the good part of the answer, and pointing out why the rest was not correct.

### 3.2. Vocalics

The proverb *'It is not what we say that counts, but how we say it'* reflects the importance of vocalics. Paralinguisic cues often reveal emotional conditions. Difference in loudness, pitch, rate, rhythm and enunciation all relate to the expression of various emotions. In the classroom, this powerful non-verbal tool can affect student participation. Generally, to correct answers, the teachers respond with positive verbal reinforcement, enhanced by vocal pitch or tone, expressing the acceptance of or agreement with the students' answer (this being often accompanied by a smile or head nods).

There is one aspect pertaining to vocalics that we, as human beings, cannot change, namely the pitch of our voice. This represents our genetic heritage and we cannot do anything about it. But we can definitely adapt/change all the other paralinguistic elements according to the situation.

Two things have been brought to my attention by my students with respect to my paralinguistic cues, as revealed by the following comments:

*'I like the fact that you speak freely when you teach, but sometimes you speak so fast that I cannot put down what you are saying.'*

The second comment comes from a student whom I seem to have sent out of the classroom because of his/her chatting during the lecture.

*'I know that I disturbed your class and I do apologize for it, but it is not entirely my fault. Since we are so numerous at the lecture, I do not always find a seat in the*

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*front desks and at the back of the classroom we cannot hear what you say*'.

I fully agree with both comments. It is true that I sometimes get carried away with the teaching and I do not realize that my speech organs move faster than my students' hands. After reading this comment, I have tried to reduce the tempo of my speech, to pause when something important has to be written down, and to read my students' non-verbal behaviour for signs of dissatisfaction for not being able to take notes. One can easily notice students bending over their neighbours' notebooks to catch up with what they have missed. As far as the second comment is concerned, I now realize that I might have overreacted by kicking out that particular student. When we teach, we have to take into account the acoustics of the classroom (which is usually bad), the noise of the traffic in the street and the noise produced by the students. The voice of the teacher has to cover all these other noises, but if our voice is not strong enough, we cannot work wonders. A solution to this problem would be for the university to provide with microphones the classrooms designed for lectures with a large number of students, so that every learner should have clear access to the information conveyed by the teacher. The visual information (be it written on the blackboard or projected on a screen or wall) is only the skeleton of the lecture; the comments of the teachers come to flesh in the skeleton, to create a whole.

### 3.3. The Use of Space (Proxemics) and Time (Chronemics)

Research in the area of proxemics[2i] shows that the use of space in the classroom can have a major impact on communication. The classroom itself has a limited amount of space and the way that space is employed will certainly affect the kind of communication between the teacher and the students, as well as among the students. The most traditional type of classroom arrangement consists of the teacher standing in front of the board or sitting at the desk which is placed in front of the students' desks. Within this arrangement, the teacher dominates the interaction in the classroom, and since the students are seated side by side, their primary focal point is the teacher. Thus most of the interaction will go from the teacher to the students and from the students to the teacher. This arrangement is frequently associated with the function of sending messages of power on behalf of the teachers, as it has been signaled by my students' comments:

'*When you stand in front of us, we have the feeling that we are so small, insignificant and stupid, but when you mingle with use during the seminars we feel that you are one of us'.*

It is very true that the teachers are in charge of the educational process and that we have to impose ourselves on the students because otherwise they will not take us seriously. On the other hand, we have to give them the feeling that we are always open to discussions and to learning from the students, too, as in this profession you keep learning as long as you live.

One other proxemic aspect relates to the way I make use of the blackboard. Somebody commented on it as follows:

*'Teacher, please don't mind my bluntness, but you are very messy when you write on the board. You speak and write very fast, you jump from one blackboard to the other, and by the time we finish writing something in our notebooks, we don't know where you wrote the other piece of information on the board. One other thing: your handwriting is too small, so that when I sit at the back of the classroom I cannot figure out what you wrote on the board.'*

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Here is an honest opinion which made me aware of my flaws. Using power-point presentations and a projector will diminish the problem posed by my small and messy handwriting. Students are much happier with the modern facilities and since our department owns modern technology, why should we not use it to avoid such problems.

As far as the use of time (chronemics) is concerned, E. T. Hall (1959) divides cultures and people into two types: *sequential* and *synchronic*. Sequential people/cultures centre their attention first on one thing and then move to something else (e.g. the British people and the Germans). They are also known to be very punctual because they schedule their activities very tightly and a delay of a few minutes will affect their entire day. Synchronic people/cultures, on the other hand, track various activities in parallel (e.g. the Latin cultures). They are also less insistent upon punctuality.

I tend to think of myself as a sequential person, who insists on being punctual and who demands punctuality from students. But it seems that there is a clash between my own and my students' use of time. I believe that my being a sequential person is the result of the German education I benefited from as a child. On the other hand, since most of the students are Romanian and since we are of Latin origin, they tend to pay little attention to coming to classes on time, and this resulted in a number of 'uncomfortable' situations. Though at the beginning of the semester I specifically informed them that I appreciate punctuality, the students kept coming late. We tried to negotiate a 'limit of lateness' and we came up to 10 minutes, but unfortunately they did not stick to it and I had to send them away from the class. They were dissatisfied, and consequently in the feed-back I received, I came across a number of complaints about the time our classes are scheduled:

*'I hate the fact that the class is at 7.30 in the morning. I cannot get up so early.'*

*'The class is too early in the morning and I cannot arrive on time because I commute'.*

The situation was not much better for the afternoon classes. Although one lecture was scheduled for 3 o'clock p.m., lots of students arrived later than that. Moreover, I also came across the following complaint:

'*The class is too late in the afternoon, there are too many students in the classroom and the atmosphere tends to warm up, so that towards the middle of the course I tend to fall asleep*.'

From these two types of comments one can draw the conclusion that irrespective of the time of the day when the classes are scheduled, students will always be late and that there will always be persons who are dissatisfied with the time-table.

On the other hand, what is interesting to notice is the fact that my punctuality has been commented upon positively by some of students:

'*… and you always come in time to classes, unlike other teachers who make us wait for them and sometimes never show up*.'

'*Sometimes when I run to fetch the bus I pray that you may be late, but you are always in time. Don't you travel by bus?*'

As teachers we have to set a good example for our students in all respects, including the use of time. It is sad that not all my colleagues are aware of this issue and they make compromises with the students: since they arrive late for classes, they allow the students to be late too, and then those teachers who insist on punctuality will be criticized and disliked. I am aware that sometimes there are objective reasons for being late, and that we need to be understanding, but this should not turn into a habit.

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## 4. Conclusions

The feed-back provided by students could constitute a good source of information concerning their needs, lacks and wants and teachers should not be afraid to ask their students to provide them with such tools. We should not feel offended by the bluntness of our students' statements, but analyse our activity from all points of view. I see no reason why a student might want to hurt our feelings by stating something that is untrue. Both students and teachers will benefit from such an evaluation tool: teachers will try to improve their activity in all respects according to the needs and wants of the students, complying nevertheless with the curriculum imposed by the university. On the other hand, the students may become more motivated to come to school, to interact with the teachers and their peers.

To be successful, it is not enough for a teacher to know the subjects s/he teaches and how to teach the subject to the students but also to think systematically about his/her practice, of his/her non-verbal behaviour in the classroom and learn from experience. Teachers need to become learners themselves now and then. They don't have to view school as their place of work or a place where they come to teach, but rather a place where they themselves come to learn. Hence, they should grasp the idea that the whole environment, as well as the students around them, can become their teachers. As Underhill (2000:v) points out, 'teacher development means taking a step back to see the larger picture of what goes on in learning, and how the relationship between students and teacher influences learning. It also means attending to small details which can in turn change the bigger picture. Teacher development is a continuous process of transforming human potential into human performance, a process that is never finished'.

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[1] Kinesics or body language refers to any kind of bodily movement or posture, which transmits a message to the observer. Every part of the human body, either in motion or stillness, conveys a meaning which depends upon the physical, social, and cultural context of the action.
[2] See the work of E.T.Hall, 1959.

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