

Communication and Effective Teaching

Detlef R Prozesky

MBChB MCommH PhD

Professor of Community Based Education

Office for Community Based Education

Faculty of Medicine

University of Pretoria

South Africa

The previous article in this series examined some important concepts related to 'teaching' and 'learning'. In this article we take a short look at the role of communication in teaching. The article aims to make readers more aware of the importance of communication in teaching, and hopes to give some ideas of how readers can improve their own teaching practice.

Communication

What is 'communication'? According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary the word means 'the act of imparting, especially news', or 'the science and practice of transmitting information'. These definitions clearly show the link between 'teaching' and 'communication': teachers are constantly imparting new knowledge, or transmitting information.

Hubley has shown us that communication is a *complex process* (Fig.1).¹ At any stage of this process things may go wrong, making the communication less effective. For instance, the sender may not express what s/he wants to say clearly; or the room may be noisy; or the receiver may not understand the words the sender is using. To be effective, teachers have to try to minimise these *barriers to communication*. We do this in a number of ways – for example, by making sure that the room is quiet and well lit; by speaking slowly and clearly; by only using words which the students should be able to understand. However, the most important way to overcome the barriers is *two-way communication* (Fig. 2). This means getting regular feedback from the receivers (the students in this case): are they really understanding what we are trying to put across?

Communication does not only take place by means of words; *non-verbal communication* (or *body language*) is equally important. We are all familiar with the different kinds of non-verbal communication (Fig. 3).

This kind of communication is usually subconscious – we use it without thinking about it; that is why we say that 'it is difficult to lie in body language'. If teachers really attend to the body language of their students they will know when they are bored or confused. From the body language of their teachers students pick up whether they are confident and enthusiastic.

Person-to-Person Communication: Presentation Skills

In the previous article we discussed different styles of teaching. Some teachers like to talk, and expect the students to write down what they say and to learn it (this

style encourages superficial learning - and rapid forgetting!). Other teachers see their role as one of helping the students to learn at a deeper level - to understand new ideas and concepts so well that they can apply them in a work situation. Either way, these teachers will do a better job if they communicate well with their students.

An important element of communication in teaching is the use of teaching aids. We have all heard the saying: 'What I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I know'. Pictures, written posters and practical demonstrations improve communication and we should use them as much as possible. Most of us have access to paper, posters, a chalkboard, or an overhead projector. We can use these to prepare aids for our lessons: summaries of important facts, or pictures and diagrams. The overhead projector is particularly useful, because it allows us to face our students while using it.

Fig. 1: Communication

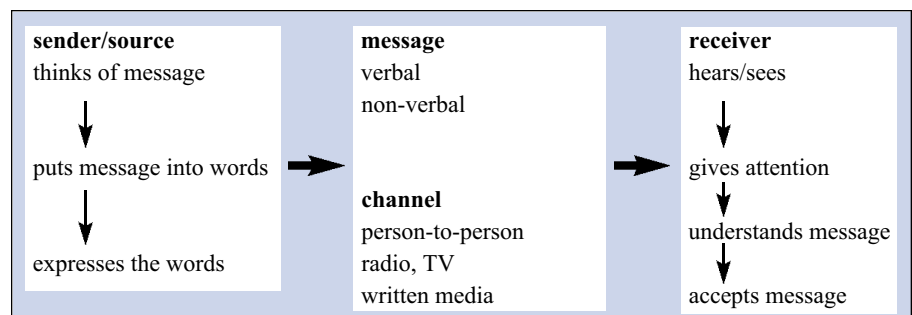


Fig. 2: Two-Way Communication

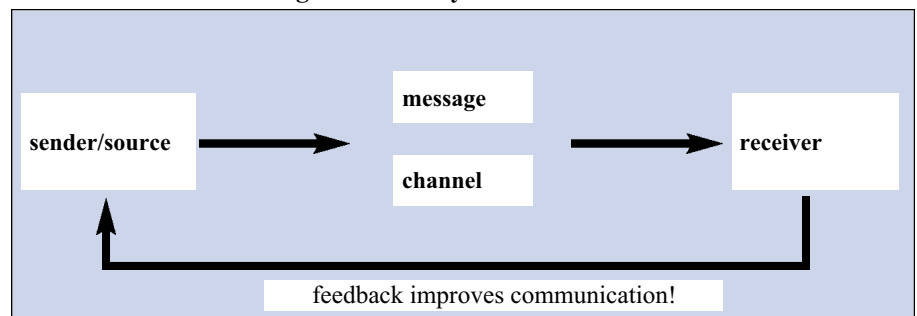


Fig. 3: Non-Verbal Communication/Body Language

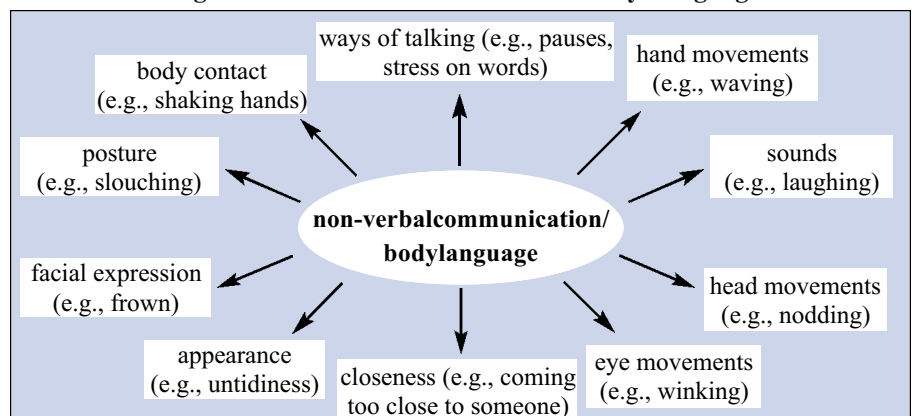


Fig 4: Checklist for Communication During Teaching

<p>About the style of presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does the teacher speak clearly?</i> (loud enough; not too fast; faces the class; avoids mannerisms like ‘um’) • <i>Is the teacher’s non-verbal communication suitable?</i> (appropriate gestures and expressions; moves around; eye contact with whole class) • <i>Does the teacher speak understandably?</i> (uses words that the students should be able to understand) • <i>Is the speed of presentation right?</i> (the students must be able to absorb the material that is presented) • <i>Is there two-way communication?</i> (the teacher checks regularly if the students have understood) • <i>Is there evidence of a good relationship between teacher and students?</i> (teacher and students respect each other, listen to each other)
<p>About the content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does the teacher emphasise important knowledge?</i> (the main messages are clear and emphasised, unnecessary detail is left out) • <i>Is information presented in a logical sequence?</i> (bits of information follow logically after each other – easy to understand and remember)
<p>About the place where the teaching is happening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is the place conducive to good communication?</i> (enough light; no noise from outside) • <i>Are the students comfortable?</i> (adequate seating; students can see the teacher; not too hot/ too cold)
<p>About the use of teaching aids</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Are the teaching aids relevant?</i> (the aids only deal with the subject matter of the lesson, and clarify it) • <i>Are the teaching aids well prepared?</i> (only contain highlights/ main points; neat; different colours are used) • <i>Are the teaching aids easy to read and understand?</i> (letters and pictures are large enough; not too much crammed onto one aid) • <i>Are the teaching aids skilfully used?</i> (the teacher handles them with confidence; uses a pointer; does not mix them up)

Fig. 5 : Checklist for Writing Good Handouts

<p>About the content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does it emphasize important knowledge?</i> (makes clear what is important - the students don’t know) • <i>Does it present information in a logical sequence?</i> (information logically connected, so it is easy to understand and to learn) • <i>Is it scientifically accurate and up-to-date?</i> (information is true, comprehensive, in line with current thinking)
<p>About the style of writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Are the sentences short?</i> (not more than 20 words; one idea per sentence) • <i>Are active verbs used as much as possible?*</i> (‘feed children regularly’, not ‘children should be regularly fed’) • <i>Are the readers likely to understand the words?</i> (no jargon; using the simplest word that will say what you want to say)
<p>About the layout/ presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is it legible/ easy to read?</i> (handwriting neat; roneo copies or photocopies clear) • <i>Is it well spaced and not too full?</i> (a page crammed full of print is discouraging, boring, difficult to read) • <i>Is it striking and interesting?</i> (different letter sizes; bold font used for emphasis; pictures or diagrams included)

* this is true for English – in other languages the passive voice may be clear and acceptable

How can I know whether I am communicating well as a teacher? Communication is a skill – and we improve our skills by getting feedback on the way we perform them. We can get such feedback by asking an experienced colleague to sit in on our teaching, and to give us feedback. We can also ask someone to record us on a video-tape as we teach, which we then inspect critically afterwards. In either case the feedback will be better if we use a checklist to judge our performance. Fig. 4 gives such a checklist.

Written Communication: Handouts

Teachers communicate by speaking, but also by writing. We have seen how we can improve the overhead projector transparencies we use, if we write them carefully. The same is true of the *handouts* that almost all teachers prepare for their students.

What is a handout? It is *not* a photocopy of a journal article, or of some pages out of a textbook. Rather, it is a document which the teacher writes him/ herself. It may be a summary of important points to be learnt; or a guide to students on work they have to do, or references they have to look up. Teachers may use handouts for students to refer to during a lesson, and students will definitely use them in their self-study time. Because handouts are such an important way of communicating with students, they must communicate effectively. Fig. 5 provides a checklist which should help you to write better handouts.

These days many teaching institutions have websites where teachers put their handouts for the students to find. It doesn’t matter whether the handout is on paper or on a website - it still needs to be well written.

And Finally

All health workers need to communicate well, if they are to do their work well. Unfortunately, many are never taught how to do this. Teachers of health workers therefore, also have to teach their students to be better communicators.² We will learn more about this in the next article in this series.

References

- 1 Hubley, J (1993), *Communicating Health* London: Macmillan.
- 2 Abbatt F, McMahon R. (1993). *Teaching Health Care Workers*, second edition. London Macmillan.