Towards a change in communication styles for teaching

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Abstract. Teaching is based on communication, and there are many communication techniques helpful in maximizing the effectiveness of a lesson. These techniques, studied over the years and based on several different theories, have been developed assuming that the teacher is physically present in front of the students. This hypothesis collapses with the adoption of distance learning. How should communication techniques in the classroom change accordingly? This text summarizes some of the best-known effective communication techniques well established in frontal teaching, to stimulate a reflection on which of these no longer make sense and which, instead, can still be adopted, possibly modified. Reading is also useful for anyone approaching the world of teaching for improving communication styles and stimulating further studies.

Keywords: online teaching, distance learning, teaching styles, effective communication, neuro-linguistic programming

1. Introduction

There is no need to demonstrate how the 2020 pandemic has upset the daily lives, habits, and lifestyles of people around the world, nor how these upheavals have triggered a series of reactions that have led to radically change many aspects of professional activities; for our purposes, suffice it to recall that the vast majority of teachers around the world, at all levels of education, had lectured for a year and a half without being able to look their students in the face, except for the occasional moments when their webcam was on, and they suddenly and quickly had to adapt their teaching methods and styles to online teaching.

In this sudden adaptation process, confirmation emerged dramatically that the characteristics of an effective frontal lesson are not the same as those online. Although this was a consolidated hypothesis from the point of view of the planning and organizing of teaching activities (see, for example, Garavaglia & Petti, 2011), the evidence also extended to the communication style: by eliminating the physical presence and by mediating the transmission through a small screen which, more often than not, only frames the teacher's face, the ability to communicate is radically compromised. For example, among the fundamental requirements of an effective lesson is notoriously included the practice of always looking in the eyes of the people who listen to make them feel involved; this is impossible in distance learning.

A series of communication techniques and classroom management practices that were traditionally adopted, more or less consciously, by teachers worldwide have suddenly become inapplicable or, at least, only partially effective. In order to stimulate a discussion in the forum of the XXVI Summer School and Conference of the Italian university professors of Industrial Systems Engineering, this reading summarizes a short and partial list of the best-known effective communication techniques well established in frontal teaching. While facing the inevitable state of frustration deriving from the need to change their way of working, teachers must reflect on the techniques and practices characteristic of their communication style and imagine how to adapt them to hybrid or online teaching in the uncertain "new normal" of which everyone talks.

2. Effective communication techniques in teaching

It is well established that although communication apparently first passes through a process of consciousness (language), it is not an activity of the conscious mind. A simple demonstration, evident to anyone who has had a classroom experience, is that the audience immediately evaluates the teacher by noting the following elements, captured in a completely intuitive way in less than a minute:

- enthusiasm and optimism: the audience wishes to receive positive messages;
- dominance and proaction: the audience loves those who can control the situation and are confident in what they do;
- involvement and interaction: the audience wants attention and to be part of the scene;
- confidence and empathy: the audience desires respect and being on the same human level.

In perceiving these elements and defining the opinion on the teachers - which will radically influence the subsequent learning process - the audience does not make a conscious or demanding mental processing effort but, more simply, an idea is formed, unconsciously, in a few seconds. Competence - certainly a critical requirement which, although presupposed, must be continuously confirmed by the teacher during the lesson - is evaluated only later.

Briefly recalling more technical references, the effectiveness of the communication techniques developed as a consequence of the studies on neuro-linguistic programming in teaching has already been consolidated for some time (James & Shephard, 2001; Sibley, 2005; Churches & Terry, 2007). It is impossible not to remember that, in turn, neuro-linguistic programming originates from the studies on the dialogue models of Milton Eriksson in

hypnotherapy (Bandler & Grinder, 1975a) and the so-called *learning state* - the mental state in which learning is maximum - is achieved through the induction of a light trance state (Bandler & Grinder, 1975b). Also, the studies on sales techniques (de la Parra Paz, 2003), on persuasive communication (Cialdini, 1984) and, further back, on family psychotherapy (Satir, 1988) inspired communication models that have subsequently been adapted for public communication. Even the neuroscience studies on the "split-brains" of Nobel laureate Roger Sperry (Sperry, 1961) have opened up numerous lines of research which then merged into studies on the relationship between communication and personality, later declined in the field of effective communication.

Just as these complex and refined theories can be faced and studied at different levels of depth and detail, the didactic techniques deriving from them also include a vast assortment ranging from simple precautions that can be easily implemented by anyone, to complex techniques of presentation and dialogue suitable for teachers with great command of the language, up to the aforementioned hypnotic techniques that can be mastered only by the most experienced. In any case, these teaching techniques were originally conceived and developed assuming the teacher is physically in front of the audience.

2.1. At the beginning of the lesson

Some teachers at the beginning of the lesson usually enter the classroom and position themselves centrally in front of the audience; with a relaxed and smiling expression - never strained or unnatural - remain silent for about a minute waiting for the audience to interrupt previous conversations and wait for a nod or a signal. This expedient is used to emphasize that the audience accepts that the teacher is in control of the situation. Wanting to reinforce this belief in the audience, the teacher can then start by communicating that some important information will be given and that it could be useful to take notes: the students, all together, will take a pen and paper and prepare to write what the teacher is about to say. The choral execution of the instruction unconsciously consolidates the concept of audience (who carries out orders) and teacher (who gives orders) and again underlines that the teacher controls the situation. Each student expects the teacher to lead the lesson; if the teacher hesitates or appears lost, his authority will collapse.

Demonstrating to be serene, calm, and relaxed is essential, both at the beginning of and during the lesson (Carnagie, 1962): moods are contagious and, indeed, the audience tends to follow the condition of the teacher the more it is convinced that the teacher is authoritative and worthy of esteem (see the concept of rapport creation in O'Connor & McDermott, 1996). Thus, it is essential to project an energetic, enthusiastic image and keep a cheerful tone to make a lesson enjoyable. Starting a speech with a nervous or angry expression would induce a negative state in the audience, and any eventual initial waiting in silence would be interpreted as a demonstration of authority, creating a counterproductive conflict between the teacher and the audience. So, being nervous entering the classroom, it may

be useful to take some time before starting the lesson, for example checking that the audio/video connections are set up and working, or pouring a glass of water and, thus, finding calm.

Similarly, before starting the lesson, it is essential to study the speech and being convinced of it: the positive feeling of the topic will be transmitted to the audience. Knowing to be exposed to probable initial hesitations or nervous blackouts, it is helpful to prepare the opening well (with a joke, a metaphor), always repeating it in different ways, and never memorize it by heart. It is crucial to overcome the initial "fight or flight" time frame (Cannon, 1915) in which the brain reacts to the acute stress reaction, which typically affects inexperienced teachers at the beginning of the lesson for a few minutes. For this reason, it is useful to prepare and repeat the opening, but not the entire lesson. It should also be remembered that the opening of a speech is different from its content: its specific intent is to gain the audience's interest in the speaker and the message. So, starting a lesson with an anecdote can be helpful to induce a state of fascination in the students and easily overcome any possible initial critical moment.

2.2. The metaphors

The ability to communicate also depends on making oneself interesting and making the public want to listen. The public is always looking for fun, and part of this comes from the state that the teacher manages to unleash. All stories and tales evoke a state; this is why people like to listen to stories or go to the cinema: metaphor is a sentence, a story, or an anecdote that expresses a concept in terms of another; the clarification takes place on an unconscious level, finding the parallelism between the narrated episode and one's personal situation. Therefore, the metaphor must refer to the interlocutor's personal framework; but different people have different experiences, so they react differently to metaphors. For this reason, it is convenient to base the metaphors on universal, common experiences where all people can identify in.

The metaphors capture the attention, creating a state of fascination even if the topic is boring; they simplify ideas, and even the smartest people prefer simple and easy concepts to understand. Metaphors involve emotional aspects: if the message relies on personal and emotional aspects, the level of identification makes the message more easily received. Extremely, the metaphor is the base of the hypnotic technique of selectional restriction violation (Erickson, et al., 1976), useful for conveying to the listener a message complex to explain. Finally, the metaphors are easily remembered: the interlocutor can forget the notions but hardly forgets a story or an anecdote.

2.3. The charisma pattern

Early in the development of neuro-linguistic programming, the presentation style of several noted and charismatic speakers, including John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, were modeled. From this modeling emerged a language pattern these effective presenters use at the beginning of their speeches that became known as the charisma pattern (James and Shephard, 2001).

The charisma pattern is based on the assumption that all human beings interpret reality through the five senses but that each gives a different importance to the information that comes from it. Consequently, the more all the senses are involved, the more communication becomes effective and inclusive. The charisma pattern provides that speakers start their speech slowly in a low-pitched voice using kinesthetic (K) predicates. Then they pick up speed and pitch a bit and begin mixing in some auditory (A) predicates. Finally, they increase speed, pitch a bit more, and add visual (V) predicates (O'Conner and Seymour, 1990). Then, they continuously repeat the K-A-V pattern during the lesson. In this way, they match the preferred learning styles of the people in the audience in the order of their information processing speed.

The kinesthetic, auditory, and visual aspects are therefore not only limited to the expression speed, tone, and volume of the voice (paraverbal communication) but also to the use of specific terms (verbal communication) and also to expressions, posture, the way of gesturing and move in space (non-verbal communication) (James and Shephard, 2001). Teachers who have automated the use of the charisma pattern are easily recognizable because the audience hardly releases eye contact or gets distracted.

2.4. Styles of communication

A technique that has its origins in family psychotherapy leverages the five conceptual styles of communication of Virginia Satir (1988), the famous American psychotherapist who developed a theory for resolving conflicts bringing people together. Satir's five styles of communication are:

- blaming, to provoke emotional responses: the teacher shall show a dominant and aggressive non-verbal attitude, keeping the gaze fixed on the audience;
- placating, to be accepted: the teacher shall adopt a non-verbal apologetic attitude, using a calm and relaxed tone of voice;
- computing, to inform: the teacher shall transfer the contents aseptically, with a monotone voice, minimal gestures, and centered posture;
- distracting, to catalyze attention: the teacher shall adopt an asymmetrical and fun attitude, moving in space and acting unexpectedly, to release the tension of the audience by surprising it;
- leveling, to reinforce some messages and involve the audience: the teacher shall maintain symmetrical, soft non-verbal behavior, with a reassuring and well-modulated voice tone.

These styles shall be continuously alternated during the lesson.

2.5. Nested loops

Nested loops are a multilevel communication technique in which multiple stories are started and left open, as subordinated clauses, during the speech. If the transition from one story to another is sufficiently abrupt, the audience can be induced into a state of light trance because the listener's conscious mind is overloaded, enhancing the hypnotic phenomena (Bandler & Grinder, 1975).

In teaching, this technique is very useful for keeping the public's attention alive and preventing a premature conclusion of the speech from being reached ("I already understood where the speaker wants to arrive, it is useless to pay attention"). Furthermore, bypassing the conscious mind and accessing the unconscious mind is the base step to push the students towards the learning state.

2.6. Anchoring

Presenting a concept by standing in the same position of the classroom or evidencing the same specific posture or with the same particular tone of voice, the audience will tend to create a connection between that communicative attitude - position, posture, or tone of voice - and that concept. When, during the lesson, the communicative attitude is replicated, the audience will unconsciously recall the specific concept in memory. This will facilitate the transmission of the message, which will occur partially at an unconscious level (Erickson, et al., 1976).

A simple example of spatial anchoring is that used to describe concepts that evolve over time: by education, people usually imagine the timeline flowing from left to right (anyone who has had to deal with graphs of motion may undoubtedly agree). For this reason, the teacher shall move (or refer with hand gestures) to the left of the audience when referring to the past or assumptions, and to the right when referring to the future or solution.

2.7. Structuring the content

The sequence in which the concepts are presented was also the subject of study: Bernice McCarthy originally developed the 4MAT model in 1980 (McCarthy, 1980), based on research on learning styles and on the right and left brain dominance. Since then, the method has systematically and continuously been used, developed, and linked to the newest research in the field.

The 4MAT schematization distinguishes four learning styles:

- WHY style attracts those interested in motivation (discussion);
- WHAT style attracts those interested in classification information (traditional teaching);
- HOW style attracts those interested in pragmatic aspects (guided experimentation);
- IF style attracts those interested in the consequences (reflection).

The idea is to present the concepts so that the audience can find them in each of the learning styles: an example of 4MAT structured speech is as follows: "Today we are going to deal with the topic of hydraulic pumps; briefly, hydraulic pumps are devices that ... " (Synthetic WHAT); "This is why hydraulic pumps are important: ..." (WHY); "Pumps are classified in these categories ..." (Extensive WHAT); "Now let's see an exercise to understand how to rightsize hydraulic pumps" (HOW); "In light of the exercise, what are your observations? What do you think are the most important parameters in hydraulic pump rightsizing?" (IF).

3. Concluding remarks

This reading lists some effective communication techniques adopted in traditional teaching, from simple expedients to manage better the start of a lesson to complex practices based on hypnosis and neuro-linguistic programming theories, necessary to induce the learning state in students.

Effective teachers typically combine many of the techniques mentioned above during a lesson without giving the audience the impression of adopting an artificial attitude or repeating a lesson speaking "for themselves". Beyond studying in-depth, to fully automate the use of these techniques is necessary to practice a lot.

Unfortunately, however, many of the efforts made by teachers over the years to refine their communication style have been invalidated by the forced adoption of distance learning tools which, mediating communication through video and essentially reducing it to one-way communication, prevent or hinder the application of these techniques.

This does not mean that these traditional classroom communication techniques should be abandoned: on the contrary, it is necessary to reflect on which of these no longer make sense in online or hybrid teaching as well as which of these can still be considered valid and which should be modified, and how. To stimulate discussion, the question is here left open.

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