

Nonverbal Communication: A Tool for Managing the Active Classroom

With the shift towards active-learning-based strategies, classroom management becomes an increasingly important teaching skill. The growing role of the instructor as facilitator, rather than content deliverer, creates potentially new challenges in maintaining classroom order. This may be especially difficult for young, female, and/or petite individuals as students may treat them as peers rather than respected authorities. So how is one to maintain a friendly, engaging, and positive working environment while not succumbing to utter chaos?

We can optimize our nonverbal communication to support the learning environment we seek in an active classroom. With respect to body language, there is a beneficial balance between communicating authority and openness. Not surprisingly, authority is often measured by confidence. Erect posture, balanced with feet shoulder-width apart, communicates self-assurance. Body language experts promote this idea of “taking-up-space,” suggesting confidence and authority, versus “becoming small,” suggesting meekness.^[1] This is also naturally aided by gestures which, when used for emphasis, enable both greater engagement and create a larger “sphere-of-occupancy” that promotes perceptions of confidence and authority. To maintain approachability, this is coupled with open body language in the form of uncrossed arms and legs, and gestures with palms facing upward.

Physical space can likewise be used to our advantage, even when not designed for active learning. Preferably, an active space allows students to collaborate, with ample room for the instructor to roam among student workspaces. While some institutions have created such spaces, many active-learning instructors must navigate traditional classrooms. If possible, move desks to create work “clusters.” Walking through the space created between these clusters allows the instructor to maintain an innate degree of authority through height and movement. By moving close to student groups, the instructor remains available to students for inquiries, even as the room descends into a productive noisy bustle.

Observation of student nonverbal communication can also aid the instructor in “reading” the class environment. Engaged students will often be seen leaning forward over their work, actively listening, and/or taking notes. Disengaged students may be leaning back, have their arms crossed, or be slumped forward, supporting their head in their hands. Students engaged in noncourse related activities may present incongruent expressions; a student looking down and smiling may be amused by something on their phone. As with any nonverbal communication, it is important to recognize that these cues may vary by individual, and nonverbal clusters are important. A hunched-over student with crossed arms may be disengaged, upset, or cold. Similarly, a student leaning back but actively maintaining eye contact may be silently observing and reflecting. Body position, hand placement, eye contact, and expression all work together to communicate nonverbally.

Nonverbal cues can similarly aid in assessing student group dynamics. Humans subconsciously use mirroring others’ nonverbal cues to build relationships.^[2] Student groups who display heterogeneous nonverbal communication may be indicative of a non-cohesive group. A single individual may demonstrate different nonverbal language from her peers, or there may be a divided split between group members. Instructors can use these observations to inform their approach to facilitating group interactions, incorporating team-building exercises, or assigning groups depending on the course/activity goals.

Regaining control in an active classroom after a flurry of activity can be difficult. A physical barrier (*e.g.*, podium) may be utilized here. Returning to the “front” of the room, where a clear line of sight to the door is available to observe entry and exit, is recommended to re-establish control. Even the simple and intuitive gesture of standing up or raising one hand is effective and grounded in theories of nonverbal communication. This action gives height, which can immediately increase authority. If needed, an additional signal (*e.g.*, ringing a bell, clapping, or toggling lights) can be used attract student attention.

Managing an active-learning classroom is not a trivial task. As academic spaces evolve to better support these environments, new challenges to incorporating active techniques will undoubtedly arise. Nonverbal communication can aid instructors in overcoming these challenges.

REFERENCES

1. Pease, B., and A. Pease., *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, Bantam, New York (2008)
2. Chartrand, T.L., and R. Van Baaren, “Human Mimicry,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, **41**, 219 (2009) □

—ELIF EDA MISKIOGLU

This one-page column presents practical teaching, advising, and diversity tips in sufficient detail that others can adopt the tip. Focus on the teaching method, not content. The column should be maximum 550 words, but subtract 50 words for each figure or table. Submit as a Word file to Phil Wankat <wankat@ecn.purdue.edu>.