Positive Communication: Classroom, Workplace, And Parenting

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*Essays advance a new idea, summarize a development, or initiate or engage in discussion. They may be narrower in scope than the above categories, but the subject matter should be of general scholarly interest.

Abstract
Education provides students with the important, domain-specific skills required for their chosen career (e.g., nursing, engineering, etc). However, institutions of higher education are also tasked with developing transferable or "soft" skills which will be beneficial in any career. These include communication, numeracy, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, information literacy, and many more. In this paper, we focus on the importance of positive communication both in the classroom and in a specific career (nursing). We also explain how this skill is important for parenting. In this way, we connect classroom learning to our students' future workplaces and personal lives. Specific examples of positive communication are provided to help faculty model this in the classroom.

Introduction

The purpose of education is to prepare students for their future careers but also to prepare them for life more generally. We want to ensure that our students have the skills they require to be successful in all of their future endeavours. To do this, we teach students not only information and skills specific to their field but also help them develop other abilities which they can take with them regardless of their specific vocation. There has been renewed attention in recent years to the importance of transferable skills (also sometimes referred to as soft skills), and rightfully so (Mello & Wattret, 2021; Olesen et al., 2021; Tight, 2021). Transferable skills are those which are not content-specific and will transfer to any area of work and life and include critical thinking, teamwork/collaboration, problem-solving, numeracy, and communication (Government of Canada, 2023; Government of Ontario, n.d.; Mello & Wattret, 2021; Tight, 2021). Transferable skills are very important for our students' ultimate success in the classroom and beyond, including landing a job (Mello & Wattret, 2021), performing well at that job, and being a successful member of society outside of work. Direct instruction is one way we can teach students these skills, but we can also mirror desirable behaviours for our students to imitate.

In this paper, we propose that positive communication is one such behaviour that we can model for students in the context of the classroom, which, like other transferable skills, has benefits well beyond those four walls. Mirivel's (2014, 2018) model of positive communication, which includes the actions of greeting, asking, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, and listening, proposes that communication can help create, maintain, and deepen human relationships, among other goals. Although non-verbal communication plays an important role in communicative exchanges, we focus on the linguistic aspects of positive communication in this paper because it is these linguistic aspects of positive communication which can more easily be prepared ahead of time and translate well to all classrooms, regardless of delivery mode (e.g., online) (Frisby, 2019; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). We also provide specific examples related to one profession (nursing), though the ideas can be transferred and adapted to many different vocations.

Holding a PhD in psycholinguistics and as a long-time college professor, the first author has had the opportunity to consider her approach to communicating with students from both of these perspectives. For example, considering the wording in the course outline/syllabus, student feedback, and reframing failures. The second author's job as a home care nurse requires constant communication with various patients, frequently teaching patients about their own medical care between visits. In both cases, they are also parents to young children.

The Role of Communication in Learning

There are many theoretical perspectives about how we learn, such as the humanistic and constructivist perspectives, but this paper is positioned in the context of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Social Learning Theory proposes that learning is a social process which occurs through our interactions with others, including our professors and classmates. Because of this, the communications we receive from others in the context of education can support (or not) relationships and consequently foster (or hinder) our learning. In the context of communication, which has the possibility of promoting learning, some communication behaviours might be able to support student engagement in learning, which is also one of the three principles of universal design for learning (UDL; CAST, 2018, 2024). The UDL principle of Engagement refers to students' motivation to learn and suggests that faculty should endeavour to create learning environments where students are able to bring their authentic selves and where threats and distractions are minimized (CAST, 2018, 2024). In this way, communication is an important part of the learning process. Teaching is, after all, a relational profession (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021).

Positive vs. Negative Communication

In the context of learning being a social act, negative communication is counterproductive as it doesn't support building social connections and thus might hinder learning. Unlike positive communication, negative communication can elicit a fight-or-flight response from the receiver of our message if what we are saying is perceived as a threat (McCarty, 2016). When that happens, students don't really hear what the faculty is saying anyway, so whatever we are teaching or saying is not getting through. When we perceive a threat, our stress response causes our sympathetic nervous system to activate and release hormones, which prepares us to either flee or confront the threat by producing a physical response (Goldstein, 2010; McCarty, 2016; Nunez, 2020). Depending on what is being said, the person hearing it can feel threatened or interpret the message as an affront (even if not the intention) and therefore, the fight-or-flight response can be triggered (Nunez, 2020). It is automatic, so we can't typically control whether we will react that way in a particular communicative exchange. However, if we frame our communications more positively, we lessen the chances that our interlocutor will feel threatened by our message or language.

For decades, research in the field of positive psychology has highlighted many benefits of positivity (see Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Positive communication, more generally, is important for all sorts of human interactions, including those we have with our students, members of the public, and family members (Socha, 2009). It may include elements of active listening (e.g., reflecting back what has been said) and open body language, but perhaps more importantly, positive communication has been argued to be a behaviour that facilitates many human needs (for a discussion, see Maslow, 1954; Socha & Beck, 2015).

The benefits of positive communication are plentiful, including having positive effects on health and wellness (Pitts & Socha, 2013), increasing happiness (Socha & Pitts, 2012), empowering (rather than marginalizing) students (Christian et

al., 2020), encouraging learning by fostering a good teacher-student relationship (Bain, 2004; Fried et al., 2015; Yan et al., 2011), promoting a growth mindset (Kennette & Myatt, 2018), motivating students (CAST, 2024), and improving students' learning outcomes, broadly defined (Ani, 2019; CAST, 2024; Deci et al, 1999; Rowe, 2011).

Positive Communication in Action

As a general goal of communication, we want to make the receiver feel comfortable and receptive. To this end, we can begin our communication with gratitude: responding with a thank you for asking a question or for making a request, which starts off the exchange in a positive light. Even when we have a critique or correction to make, it is still possible (and beneficial) to frame it positively. It is important for us (and our students) to be mindful of the value of positive communication, particularly in the classroom. Below, we provide additional examples in three settings—in the classroom, in a homecare nursing context, and in our roles as parents—to illustrate the various forms this can take.

In the classroom

As instructors, we have many opportunities to communicate with our students as part of our instructional goals. We might provide suggestions or other feedback on assignments. Or we might make a conscious effort to develop or nurture our social/teacher presence as instructors by communicating with them during class or outside of class, individually or in groups, which has been shown to increase student engagement, motivation, and satisfaction (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Oh et al., 2018). In each of these cases, framing our messages with gratitude and positivity can help to ensure that students actually hear and are able to process what we have to say, and in doing so, we may be able to address more of their needs (e.g., understanding, affection, protection, participation, creation, and/or identity (Max-Neef, 2017; Socha & Beck, 2015)). Although we will discuss how instructors can pre-plan positive communication, there are instances when communication must occur immediately and/or cannot be prepared ahead of time. For example, when receiving an email from a student or when a student poses a question in class. In these instances, our first communication response should be gratitude (thanks for asking a question (or answering the question you posed) or for sending you the email making a particular request). This is particularly important if the student didn't answer correctly, asked a "dumb" question (e.g., one that is answered in the course outline/syllabus), or is making a request that you refuse or find frustrating. Responding with gratitude/positivity makes the student feel appreciated and helps them to tune in to what follows because positivity reduces discomfort and makes students more open to the message (Berger, 2013; Parkes et al., 2013). In general, humans want to approach positive things and avoid negative things, so starting with something positive will hook them in, and they will want to know what else you have to say while also reducing their (potential) defensiveness and the feeling that you are a threat (Nelson & Quick, 2013). As an additional benefit of this positive communication, practicing gratitude has many benefits for us as well (see Kennette & Myatt, 2018).

In addition to on-the-fly communication with students, we can also prepare some positive communication moments with a bit of planning. For example, we can examine the wording of our rubrics for assignments. Are we framing the feedback positively or punitively? Rather than writing "totally unclear," we might write "requires more clarity." On assignments, feedback might need to be corrective (and constructive), but we shouldn't forget to also let students know where their strengths are. Even for students earning little positive feedback in terms of content, we can at least thank them for submitting their assignments. Another way to positively frame students' weaknesses is to come from the perspective of a growth mindset, explaining that they may not have the necessary skills yet, but that if they keep working at it like they currently are, they will continue to make progress and eventually become skillful. Our "good" students may be particularly encouraged by positive feedback as they may not get as much praise/communication from us as students who are struggling. A little positive reinforcement in the form of digital badges, stickers, or email messages can also help to motivate students and ensure that our high-achieving students (as well as our less consistent students) are all receiving positive communication from us when they do something well.

Some of this feedback can also be automated so that we remember to frame our comments positively. One approach that has been successful for me is to keep a document of frequent comments that can be copied and pasted into assignments, but text-expanding software provides another, more automated option. With these (often free) pieces of software, instructors can pre-program text to appear whenever they type a particular string of letters. For example,

typing “$question” will populate a standard response to any student asking a question that is already answered in the course outline/syllabus, starting with thanking them for the email and then directing them to the location of the information on the learning management system. All I have to write is a very short string of characters, and I’m certain that my response will be framed positively. In my specific learning management system (Brightspace/D2L), there are also “intelligent agents” which can be set up by instructors. These automatically email students a message when they meet certain criteria (e.g., log in for the first time, earn a certain score on an assessment, or complete a weekly checklist). Most learning management systems will have a way to, at least, semi-automate this feedback, even if it’s just selecting all the applicable students and BCCing their email addresses in a congratulatory email message.

These many ways to frame our communication with students positively can affect their academic success while they are in our classroom, but they can also transfer over to the workplace once they move on to their chosen careers.

In the workplace

In 1597, Sir Francis Bacon wrote that knowledge is power (Bacon, 1996). However, for nurses, knowledge means more effective healing (physically, emotionally, or spiritually). Teaching clients or patients to detect infection and be proactive is key to more rapid and successful healing, but this can also be scary for them. As such, it’s important to be reassuring and clear but also positive in our communication rather than frightening or threatening (scaring them about the potential outcomes), which could engage a fight-or-flight response and make them miss some of the important information that needs to be conveyed. Similar to classroom communication, avoiding the fight-or-flight response is key to the success of communication, and using a positive communication approach is one way to support this.

In addition to patient communication, we often also communicate with other nurses. Being a nurse in the community often introduces new hires or placement students that require training. This is a great opportunity to model positive communication in the field, which can lead to a more collaborative workplace. This modelling is similar to the way professors can model positive communication behaviours, such as reframing failures, which students might then internalize themselves.

As parents

In another application of this transferable skill of positive communication, we look at parenting. One style of parenting which is associated with the best outcomes for children is authoritative parenting (Wong et al., 2021). With authoritative parenting, parents explain why they have certain rules or make certain decisions rather than allowing the child free reign (permissive parenting), neglecting them (neglectful parenting), or being very strict (authoritarian parenting), with the latter generally being associated with some of the worst outcomes (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Thompson et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2021). As parents or caretakers, we also want to ensure that we frame behavioural outcomes in terms of rewards rather than punishments so that children focus on the benefits of good behaviours rather than the punitive outcomes of choosing bad behaviours (this advice also works in the classroom and in the workplace!) This principle also applies to the classroom, where we can word our course policies to focus on rewards (bonus points) for desired behaviours rather than punishments (loss of marks) for undesirable behaviours.

When children get caught doing something they know is wrong, or they feel attacked, their sympathetic nervous system is activated, and this stress response triggers the fight-or-flight reaction because it is perceived as a threat (McCarty, 2016). Children are ill-equipped to manage these big emotions or the potential guilt which arises from their undesired behaviour (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012), which may also be true of students in higher education since by the time they enter college or university, they may not have acquired (or be well-practiced in) these skills. This is another instance where gratitude can be helpful in opening children up to the information you want to convey. For example, being able to thank them for trusting you with their feelings, expressing their frustrations, or telling the truth even though they know they made a bad choice. This can help set the stage for supportive (rather than confrontational) communication, even if that conversation involves a consequence or negative outcome (e.g., a low mark on an assignment).

Often erroneously attributed to C. S. Lewis, John Trainer (2012) has proposed that “Children are not a distraction from more important work. They are the most important work” (OFlaherty, 2015). Positive communication is essential to creating confidence, as long as the encouragement is accurate and true, rather than unearned praise (Leman,

2017). This is important to keep in mind in the classroom as well; positive communication does not mean giving students unearned praise for their work but recognizing their strengths.

The needs of individuals in different audiences must be considered in communicative exchanges because the message is more likely to be heard (and effective) if their needs are being met (Socha & Beck 2015). Children may have very different developmental needs at different stages of their lives (Erikson, 1950; Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Socha and Beck (2015) state that "tired parents of toddlers…may emphasize subsistence and safety needs-satisfaction at the expense of belongingness and love needs-satisfaction" (p.188) and consequently may not be providing the toddler with what they need, so the toddler will be less motivated to listen to what the parent is saying. For children of all ages, including adolescents and young adults who may be in our classrooms, the concepts of gratitude and positivity can come through our communication in the classroom, workplace, or household in order to nurture relationships and support many types of learning.

Summary of Tips and Practical Advice

Throughout this paper, we have proposed that positive communication is a good practice in the classroom and provided some suggestions for implementing such an approach. Here, we summarize our suggestions. Among the most important considerations for faculty to reflect on to guide their pedagogical decisions related to implementing positive communication in the classroom is whether these choices will support student learning. One easy way to start implementing positive communication is to always begin a response with gratitude: thanking the student for the email, question, or other communication which they initiated. Getting into this habit can help us build relationships with students, colleagues, and others with whom we communicate. Keeping a list of common comments for students (e.g., email replies and assignment feedback) that are already worded positively will help you to more easily engage in positive communication during your communicative exchanges with students. Doing so also allows you to take your time and craft responses/wording that frames behaviours in terms of rewards (e.g., earn bonus points for submitting an assignment before the deadline) rather than threats (e.g., 10% reduction per day for late assignments). Also, automate positive communication where you can (e.g., in your LMS) so that you can reward students with your praise for their achievements. Focus on students' strengths in a way that is realistic (i.e., without handing out unearned praise). When students have areas they need to improve, you can reframe them as opportunities for improvement (e.g., "this paragraph could benefit from additional clarity") so that students might feel more motivated to persist in their learning. And finally, model positive communication for students during class and in all of your communications.

Conclusions

In the classroom, workplace, or in parenting young children, it can sometimes be easier to do things yourself (for efficiency) rather than having the student, patient, or child do the difficult work. However, teaching others promotes their independence and critical thinking skills. Regardless of your (current or future) field of practice, positive communication is beneficial and can be used to foster social relationships (with children, adult family members, or friends) and consequently support various types of learning. But it is a skill that takes practice and requires conscious effort. As the saying goes, you can attract more bees with honey than vinegar, and so there are true positive consequences to framing our communications positively. We hope the examples described here will help you to make a more conscious effort to engage in positive communication with those in your environment, and particularly in the classroom.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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