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Unraveling the Messages Our Behaviors Send to Students

HOW WE TEACH begins and ends with behaviors. It's good to remind ourselves of that every so often. Most of the ingredients identified as the components of effective instruction—things like clarity, organization, and enthusiasm—are abstractions. They're intangible, without physical form. Their presence or absence is conveyed by the behaviors that have come to be associated with them.

What makes the focus on behaviors particularly powerful is that when it comes to changing your teaching, you don't have the more daunting task of changing what you are—in my case, not terribly well organized when presenting content—but you can work on changing what you do. You aren't trying to "be more organized," you're trying to use more internal summaries, skeleton outlines, and transitions identified with statements, emphasized with a pause, and underscored by moving to a different place.

And yet as we consider our behaviors, we realize how dauntingly complex they are. What any behavior means is determined by the person who does it and by the person who observes it. But that behavior doesn't always mean the same thing to both of them. Although most users and observers equate gestures with enthusiasm, some people see gestures (especially repeated ones) and conclude the person is nervous. When the observer sees a different meaning in the behavior, then that behavior is not attached to the intended abstraction.

Moreover, typically the presence of an abstraction, take clarity for example, is not the function of a single behavior, but the aggregate of multiple behaviors. So for students to conclude that you have clarity, regularly providing definitions might not be enough. You may also need to be able to say the same thing in different ways, offer examples, partition complex concepts, identify steps in a process, and so on. How many behaviors equated with clarity does it take before an observer determines that you are being clear? That depends on the observer and most observers aren't aware enough of the behavior-abstraction connection to tell you how many you need. When some

students credit you with being clear and others do not, in addition to associating different behaviors with clarity, they are also disagreeing on the number needed.

So, not only do we have to consider that behaviors are interpreted differently and that a varying constellation of behaviors indicate the presence of a given abstraction, but we must also add to that list the influences exerted by the context in which the behavior occurs. What are the circumstances that surround the use of a given behavior or collection of behaviors? You may walk over to a part of the room so that you can better hear what a student is saying, but if a student nearby is texting, your behavior may be threatening. Maybe that student deserves to feel a bit threatened, but the meaning he's attaching to your presence illustrates how context also shapes the meaning of a behavior, and most of these context variables aren't ones teachers can control.

Finally, we can throw into the mix that fact that sometimes teachers (and people in general) do certain things without knowing that they're doing them. Say it's a repetitive behavior like pushing up sleeves, counting change in a pocket, or walking back and forth. Students can look at any of those actions and conclude that the teacher is nervous. And they're probably right. But it does engender modest amounts of anxiety to think that behaviors can communicate messages without any involvement on our part.

You could read this and wonder how there's ever any successful communication in the classroom or elsewhere. Fortunately, most of time, the majority of students will see a behavior set and equate it with the intended abstraction. That's why it makes sense to think about teaching abstractions in terms of behaviors. Chances are good that if you start regularly using behaviors associated with clarity, students will decide that you are a teacher who explains things clearly. Chances are good, but not guaranteed.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *Faculty Focus*; *Unraveling the Messages Our Behaviors Send to Students*; October 9, 2013; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/unraveling-the-messages-our-behaviors-send/>] November 1, 2013.

The Interaction Between Content, Character, and Teaching Style

I'VE BEEN THINKING lately about the relationship between what we teach and how we teach. Part of that relationship is pretty obvious: If you teach something with problems to solve, you spend time problem-solving when you teach. If you teach a skill (like writing or dancing), you spend time providing examples (of good sentences or dance steps). But what I've been trying to sort out is something on a different level—the interaction between content, character, and teaching style.

Fashion was the metaphor that started this thinking. I know, some of us have no interest in the way we express things about who we are by what we wear. Clothes keep us covered and warm. Some of us (and I'm not just referring to children) are dressed by others who end up buying most (all, in the case of my spouse) of what we wear. But still, whether by design or happenstance, what we wear sends a message. If we want to, we can use clothes to create a style that says something about who we are. It can be see INTERACTION, Page 2

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Center for Effective
Undergraduate Teaching
Carnel Learning Center, Suite 106.
Phone: 388-8426

INTERACTION

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as unique and individual as our faces.

Teaching style is also something we create and something through which our individuality can be reflected. Typically, when we think about teaching style, we equate it with the presentational aspects of teaching—we may gesture, move around, use eye contact, or vary our voice. All of these are avenues for self-expression. What we don't think much about (or, perhaps more honestly, what I haven't thought much about) is how content might also influence, not just how we teach, in terms of what we must do (solve problems or provide demonstrations), but how content might shape and influence our teaching styles.

I'm thinking content might be the "clothes" we wear when we teach.

Our relationship with what we teach is complex and emotional. Most of us are passionate about our content. We find it fascinating, challenging, and full of intellectual intrigue. Some of us have been teaching this stuff for years and are still deeply in love with it. We believe in it and know that it matters. I remember talking with a geologist who is a superb teacher. I asked what he thought made him so effective in the classroom. "Oh, it's what I teach," he said without hesitation. "It's the content. I just happen to teach the most fascinating material. Without my rocks, I wouldn't be much of a teacher."

A relationship this important must influence how we teach in significant ways, but are those ways apparent to us? Now I'm wondering if the expression of style that makes teaching authentic and powerful isn't conveyed more by how we "wear" our content than by how we gesture, use our voice, or manipulate the muscles in our face. Those aspects of content that we wear to class not only reveal things about the content, those outfits also convey things about us as human beings. When what we teach gets appropriately integrated with who we are, the results are dramatic—the style can be iconic, powerful, and beautiful. We recognize it even though we can't always explain why it works so well.

Some of us dress boldly with our content, others opt for more classic connections, and then there are those of us who love eccentricity. There's no one way or right way to dress with our content. What makes the style memorable—in other words, what makes it work—is how well it fits the person wearing it.

When I first start thinking about things I don't understand well, metaphors help me find my way. They are the scaffolding that allows me to climb up for a closer look. But a metaphor isn't the end of the story

Encouraging Student Participation: Why It Pays to Sweat the Small Stuff

A RECENT CLASSROOM observation reminded me that student participation can be encouraged and supported by attention to small but important presentational details. In this article I have highlighted these details in the form of questions, and I hope that you'll use them to reflect on the behaviors you're using when seeking, listening, and responding to student contributions.

How often do you ask a question and when do you ask it? How often does depend on the teacher but there's evidence from more than one study that a lot of us over estimate how often we ask questions. How often should you seek student contributions? More than you do? Do you ask after you've covered a chunk of content and are thinking about how much you still have to get through? Do you ask at the end of the period when a lot of students are hoping nobody says anything so they can get out a couple of minutes early?

How long do you wait? How much time passes after you've solicited input before you move on or offer some verbal follow up? There's research here too, and the findings are pretty consistent. Most faculty wait somewhere between two and three seconds before they do something else—ask the question again, call on somebody, rephrase the question, answer the question themselves, or decide nobody has anything to say and move on. When asked, most faculty claim that they wait 10 to 12 seconds. Time passes slowly when you've asked a question and there's no sign of a response—it's an awkward, uncomfortable time for the teacher and the students. But waiting longer has its rewards.

Do you encourage reflection before response? Student input improves if they have the opportunity to pull together their thoughts. Do you give them a minute to jot

any more than the scaffold is the building. We don't "wear" our content, exactly. But we do communicate things about it as we teach, and that communicates things about us. Take this as a first pass at trying to figure out how content and character get integrated into teaching style. And after that I'd love to understand how a teacher might go about creating a teaching style that maximizes the connection between the two.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Faculty Focus; The Interaction Between Content, Character, and Teaching Style; September 11, 2013; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/the-interaction-between-content-character-and-teaching-style/]; November 1, 2013

down some ideas, to talk with the person sitting next to them, to look something up in the text, or to just think about the question and how they might respond?

Do you move? How often do you get out from behind the podium? Do you routinely move across the space in the front of the room to where the student space begins? Do you cross the threshold into that student space?

Are you inviting engagement? As you move, are you establishing direct eye contact with students? If you're smiling and looking relaxed, that kind of eye contact is not threatening. A lot of students won't look at you, but some will and you can encourage them to speak with your eyes and face.

How intently do you listen? What are you doing while a student speaks? Are you looking at the student? Nodding or verbally indicating that you understand? Are you thinking about what the student is saying, or are you planning what you will say after the student is done speaking? It's hard enough getting some students to talk in class, so let's give them our full attention when they do. Don't try to multi-task—listening but sneaking a peek at the clock; listening but looking down at your notes. Attentive listening can be confirmed by what you say after the student has finished. "Thank you. Let me see if I understand your response." Follow that with a rephrase of what the student said, not what you hoped the student would say, but what the student actually said.

How are you showing that you value student contributions? Do you refer to the content of a good answer later in the class period, during a subsequent class, or in online exchanges? "Remember Paul's point about such and such. It's relevant here. Do you see the connection?" Do you point out why an answer is good? "Susan has just added something important to our discussion. Here's why it's important and why you probably ought to have in your notes." Do you value comments by writing them on the board or displaying them with the projector? Do you ever mention something you learned from a student contribution? "A couple of years ago a student in this course gave one of the best examples of this that I've ever heard."

How often do you solicit feedback from students about interaction in your classroom? Have you asked for feedback on your responses to their contributions? What do they see as the role of interaction in your classroom? What have they learned from what other students have said?

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Faculty Focus; Encouraging Student Participation: Why It Pays to Sweat the Small Stuff; September 18, 2013 [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/encouraging-student-participation-why-it-pays-to-sweat-the-small-stuff/]; November 1, 2013