A Systematic Procedure for Helping Students Overcome

Ineffective Communication Habits

by

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Running Head: Communication Habits

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Abstract

This paper discusses a systematic four-step program for eliminating ineffective communication habits and replacing them with more effective new communication behaviors. This program has been used successfully to teach a variety of different communication skills including public speaking skills, small group interaction skills, and interpersonal communication skills. The program presented in this paper provides teachers with a useful framework for helping learners overcome ineffective communication habits and becoming more skillful communicators.

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Communication educators are given the task of teaching students the skills of speaking, listening and relating to others more effectively and with greater understanding. Teaching these skills is perhaps the most important aspect of the communication educator's job. Unfortunately, it is often one of the more problematic endeavors communication teachers face. It is important because the skills of speaking, listening, and relating to others effectively are the common currency of exchange between family members, in romantic partnerships, in friendships, in work relationships, and in school. Actually, communication is a key factor in almost all facets of human life, but it is also this very commonness that makes teaching these skills problematic and difficult.

Teachers of introductory courses in most disciplines can be relatively certain that learners who attend the first class have little knowledge of the subject and have acquired few bad habits. These teachers can start, right from the beginning of the class, to help students acquire accurate knowledge and to develop useful skills. This is, unfortunately, a luxury that teachers of communication skills do not enjoy. In communication courses, and especially in introductory courses, the teacher never begins with naïve learners. High school students, for instance, literally have years of experience as participants in the communication process. Students in these classes will already have developed strategies and ways of behaving in many types of situations, and these behaviors will have come to characterize their communication style. Some of these characteristic behaviors will be effective and will serve the learner well. Many behaviors will not be effective though,

and still others will be only marginally effective. Clearly, to communicate more effectively, communication students will have to change their behavior.

Anyone who has taught a course in communication skills knows that helping learners change their behavior is one the most difficult challenges communication teachers face. The reason it is so difficult is that this "characteristic" behavior is very deeply ingrained. For instance, the results of communication studies over many years have indicated that what was once considered to be thoughtful communication behavior may be habit instead. Communication habits are like "over-learned behaviors" we all acquire from years of repeatedly performing common tasks. Habits may involve a simple action such as performing a greeting ritual, but sometimes very complex behavior patterns, like many of the behaviors associated with driving a car, can be habitual. The benefit of habitual behavior is clear, we can perform tasks much quicker and smoother if we can just do it and not have to think too much about it, and that's the key, habitual behavior can be performed with little conscious thought.

Over-learned communication habits come in a number of different forms. For instance, using vocalized pauses in speaking is one example of a communication habit. Other examples of communication habits might include using too many faddish colloquialisms (e.g., ". . . that's so awesome!") or nonspecific linguistic tags (e.g. ". . . don't you think?") that carry little meaning and only serve to confuse listeners. In addition to these simpler examples, complex communication behaviors and strategies, such as failure to adequately acknowledge the previous speaker's remarks, ineffective use of abstract levels of language, and failure to express understanding and acceptance to

a communication partner may also be communication habits. Even very problematic

actions such as social withdrawal, introversion and speech anxiety may be habitual if the

individual has repeated the behavior over and over again until the behavior occurs with

little conscious thought.

The secret to understanding communication habits is to realize that they are

generated and performed unconsciously. It is this automatic, unconscious quality of

communication habits that presents one of the greatest challenges to teaching effective

communication behavior. Ingrained communication habits will win out over new

communication skills in almost every instance, unless the old habits are unlearned.

What is needed is a systematic program for overcoming ineffective

communication habits. A four-step program for recognizing and unlearning

communication habits and replacing them with new, more effective behaviors will be

described and presented in the remainder of this paper. The program has been used

successfully for many years to help defeat communication habits in public speaking

courses as well as in courses in dyadic communication, and group communication.

Remember, the chief strength of this program is that it focuses attention on both the new

behavior to be learned and the old behavior to be unlearned.

Step I: Identification_and_Awareness_of_Communication_Habits

If performing ineffective communication habits was a matter of choice, most

people would choose to not to use them. But, because habitual behaviors occur outside

of conscious awareness, performing these habits is not open to choice. People are generally unaware of when they are enacting a habit and it is this unconscious quality of the behavior that makes the behavior so resistant to change. This is why the first task the teacher must accomplish is to help students identify their habitual communication behaviors and to help them become aware of when they are performing habitual behavior.

Observing the communication behavior of others requires practice and sensitivity. When listening to another under normal circumstances, we certainly are observing their behavior; but we are listening on the "macroscopic" level in order to derive the other's total meaning. When a speaker performs ineffective communication habits, we may experience only general feelings of confusion, misunderstanding or frustration. To pinpoint the particular behaviors contributing to the communication problem, teachers must learn to observe behavior much more specifically, on the "microscopic" level. At this level, verbal and nonverbal behavior can be observed precisely. There are two important features that will help teachers identify ineffective communication habits. First, the teacher must focus on those behaviors that recur over time and come to characterize the individual student's response style. Secondly, of those behaviors that recur consistently over time, the teacher should look specifically for those behaviors that are unproductive in that they serve as a barrier to effective communication. Once identified, these recurring behaviors are the ones the learner should focus on unlearning and replacing with more effective behaviors.

Developing awareness of behavior means much more than simply telling the learner about it. It requires describing the behavior as specifically as possible and also

describing its perceived effect on the communication situation in which it occurs. The learner must be able to think about their communication habits to the extent that they become self-aware of their behavior; that is, *they become aware of performing the behavior at the moment it is performed.* Developing this kind of awareness requires time and patience on the part of both the teacher and the learner. When self-awareness occurs, it signals that the behavior is no longer unwitting habit – it has become part of the student's awareness. It is now open to choice and subject to change.

Step II: Development of New Behaviors

Not all communication habits are detrimental in all situations. Indeed, most communication habits must have been perceived to yield some positive effect for the user or he or she wouldn't have repeated it over and over again until the act became habit. Conversely, few communication habits are effective in all situations. Teachers will understandably want to help students change as many of their ineffective behaviors as possible, but that's not always best. Instead, teachers and learners may want to set more realistic goals that increase the chances of success. A sensible goal might be to focus on up to three behaviors for each learner at a time. The upper limit is important, because as the number of communication habits a learner has to track increases, it becomes more likely that the learner will experience overload and perhaps become frustrated. Regardless, when the learner and the teacher determine that a particular behavior should be changed, the educational goal shifts from developing awareness of the old habitual behavior to learning a new behavior to replace it.

Learning a new behavior can be as time-consuming as attempts to become aware of habitual behaviors. For the student, there is, at this point, a great deal to be discovered and understood. For each new behavior, the student must understand, in detail, the actions which constitute the behavior's performance, and also, the student must understand the situations in which it is desirable to perform the new behavior. It is important that the student understands what the new behavior looks like and *feels* like when it is performed. With more complex behaviors, it is often helpful for the teacher or a classmate who has mastered the new behavior to demonstrate it for the learner.

During this step, it is extremely important to give students as much support and encouragement as possible. They are apt to feel self-conscious because their new communication behavior is likely to look and feel stilted and unnatural. The student's self-consciousness is completely normal and understandable; few people feel really comfortable the first few times we try out a new behavior. With patience, encouragement, positive reinforcement, and understanding these feelings of awkwardness and self-consciousness can be overcome.

Step III: Practice and Critique of New Behaviors

The third step begins when students begin to practice their new behaviors in the classroom. Practice is crucial; the more students practice their new behaviors, the more natural and comfortable the students will feel when they perform the behaviors. During this period of classroom practice, students should receive constant feedback about their progress in mastering their new behaviors. As in the first step, the critiques should be stated in the form of a careful description of the student's actions and the perceived effect

of the performance on his or her communication. The idea of description is particularly important here because description will focus the critic's attention on the specifics of what they have seen or felt rather than on judgments and evaluations aimed either at the learner or the learner's new behavior. As in the second step, the critiques should be positive and supportive. As the learner becomes more skilled in performing the behavior, a concomitant increase in self-assurance will occur. This rise in self-confidence indicates that the learner is now ready to integrate the new behavior into his or her general repertoire of communication behaviors.

Step IV: Integrating and Using New Behaviors in Public

The ultimate goal of this learning program is to enable students to use the new communication behaviors they've learned in their normal communication interactions. In the last step of the program, the teacher's objectives change from helping learners master new behaviors to helping them apply their new behaviors in everyday outside-of-class situations. For the teacher, this step can be troublesome because, while teachers can maintain at least some control in the classroom, they have little control over these real life learning environments.

The classroom has been called "the school of soft knocks" because teachers can create a safe environment where students can make mistakes and incur few if any serious penalties. The world outside the classroom, however, is definitely "the school of hard knocks" and teachers can do very little to insulate learners from the effects of errors made in genuine communication interaction.

Nevertheless, the outlook for helping learners apply new behaviors in outside-of-class situations is not at all dim. Many learners, for instance, naturally begin to apply their in-class learning to outside situations as they feel more confident of their new behaviors. In addition, learners also tend to begin their outside experimentation in relatively safe social milieus: that is, with family, friends and others who know and care about them. Undoubtedly, many learners may need some encouragement to begin integrating the new behaviors into their communication repertoires, but it is often surprising how little prompting most learners require.

The primary goal for teachers during this final step in the learning program is to help students understand the effects of their new behavior and help them interpret people's responses. An effective way to accomplish this goal is to have learners keep a weekly log of their experiences using their new behaviors. These logs should include answers to questions such as the following:

1.   In what situations did you perform the new behavior?

2.   What was it like to perform it?

3.   How did others respond to you?

4.   How did you react to the experience?

5.   What problems, if any, do you think you encountered in performing the behavior?

6.   What effects do you think your new behavior had on the overall communication situation?

Answers to these questions and any other insights students may record in their logs should be discussed in class to help students understand both the communicative and the social impact of their new behavior.

It is important to note that teaching communication skills invariably requires changing human behavior and changing behavior is accomplished most efficiently when the task is approached systematically. The four-step program discussed in this paper can be used to change ineffective habitual communication behavior if teachers keep two key ideas in mind – *flexibility* and *individuality.*

Flexibility is of paramount importance in implementing and using the four-step learning program successfully. The program is not a rigid recipe for change. Rather, it is a fluid process – the steps of which overlap and evolve from one to another. In implementing the program, it is best to think of the steps as phases in a continuously evolving process, rather than as discrete events.

Finally, in using the program, teachers must constantly be aware of each student's individuality. People behave the way they do for a host of individual reasons. The motivations and needs for any particular person to change his or her behavior are complex and unique. Behavior that may be right for one individual will surely not be right for all, and behavior that is effective in one situation may not be effective in other situations. The purpose of using a systematic approach to changing habitual communication behavior is not to make everyone's behavior identical – which is surely an impossible task anyway. The purpose is to give the teacher and the learner a tool for becoming aware of the learner's communication habits, and through this awareness give

the learner, with help from the teacher, the choice of changing that behavior which is

perceived to be inadequate or ineffective. When applied with flexibility and

individuality, the four-step program discussed above provides a useful framework for

helping learners change their ineffective habits and become more competent and

confident communicators.