The Significance of Congruent Communication in Effective Classroom Management

Dave F Brown


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/TCHS.79.1.12-15

Published online: 07 Aug 2010.
The Significance of Congruent Communication in Effective Classroom Management

DAVE F. BROWN

To a surprising degree, how you communicate determines your effectiveness as a teacher. Relationships are built on communication and easily destroyed by it. (Charles 2000, 48–49)

Young adolescence is a challenging time. The social and emotional growth processes among students at this stage present even the most secure adolescent with daily dilemmas that create stress and anxiety. Middle school students are not likely to search for an adult to resolve their social dilemmas; yet, unsure of what they are feeling or experiencing, adolescents may not choose to discuss their feelings with peers either. The resultant confusion about how to act or what to say often leads to inappropriate actions and harsh words spoken to the nearest adult that day: their teachers.

Imagine the following scenarios that might occur any day in the life of a middle school teacher.

1. A sixth grade student cannot get her locker open in time and is late to class. When she finally arrives the teacher sarcastically responds, “Let me guess. You forgot where my classroom is.” The other students laugh, and the late student turns red with embarrassment but manages to respond, “Who’d want to remember where this class is?”

2. Two seventh grade boys are jokingly sparring in the hallway. One hits the other a little too hard, and they begin chasing one another through the halls. As one nears the door of his classroom, he trips and falls on the floor and loudly swears, “You’re an ass!” in front of a teacher.

3. An eighth grader is exhausted after spending the previous evening completing three hours of homework that she finished at eleven o’clock. She anticipates that there will not be as much homework for her social studies class this evening. The teacher, however, assigns students an activity to do at home that will take at least forty-five minutes. She leans her head back in disgust and shouts, “This class really sucks!”

Most reasonable adults would never respond in the manner that these students have. Yet, middle level teachers are subjected to these comments daily and often respond in a punitive manner. Punishing these students, however, is not a wise teacher reaction.

Walsh (2004) provides information about cognitive developmental processes that explains why young adolescents say these sorts of things. “One of the circuits involved in emotional regulation ... is still being myelinated (developing) during adolescence, a fact that accounts for the lightning-quick flashes of anger that you see ...” (37). Middle level teachers must understand that their students will regularly make ill-mannered comments. These social mistakes are a part of young adolescents’ growth as they experiment in searching for their own identity. The way that educators react to these frequent miscues impacts their relationships with students and their students’ willingness to cooperate. Overly punitive actions exacerbate negative feelings between students and teachers.

The ability for people to trust one another is critical to maintaining any respectful relationship. Trust is required in a marriage, a collegial working relationship, or the relationship between children and parents. The same level of trust must be developed between students—all students—and their teacher. Trust begins to develop when teachers establish appropriate means of communicating with each student. Effective communication is the basis of developing an environment of mutual respect between students and teachers.
more congruent the communication is between students and teachers, the more likely students are to become willing participants in the learning process, and the more likely it is that the teacher can maintain a comfortable classroom management environment.

**What is Congruent Communication?**

The idea of teachers reflecting on what they say to students is not a recent suggestion for effective teaching. Ginott (1971) explained three decades ago that “Congruent communication is a style of speaking that does not attack others, but instead remains harmonious with feelings being experienced” (cited in Charles 1999, 57). More specifically, middle level teachers can communicate congruently with young adolescents by:

- Using active listening techniques;
- Demonstrating body language and facial expressions that match verbal messages;
- Avoiding traditional communication roadblocks;
- Responding with empathy to students’ anxiety and frustration;
- Using culturally responsive communication processes.

Many teachers may believe that these actions are insignificant to successfully managing students, yet the ways that teachers respond both verbally and nonverbally are the initial signs that students use to determine whether they will cooperate with teachers.

**Active Listening and Body Language**

Ladson-Billings listed these responses from a group of eighth graders she interviewed when she asked them what they liked about their teacher:

- She listens to us!
- She respects us!
- She lets us express our opinions!
- She looks us in the eye when she talks to us!
- She smiles at us!
- She speaks to us when she sees us in the hall or in the cafeteria! (1994, 68)

These responses reveal a great deal about young adolescents’ need for teachers to listen to them. Students’ recognition of how teachers respond to them nonverbally is also quite obvious in these comments. Young adolescents need to speak to adults, and adults must actively listen to them when this need exists. McCarthy noted that children “[H]ave spent at least a decade as listeners in most situations. During adolescence they want and need the chance to share their feelings and ideas . . .” (1999, 4–5). Teachers may falsely believe that their students aren’t interested in speaking to them; however, there are many developmental aspects of young adolescence that create a need for students to speak to caring adults. Young adolescents experience daily social challenges such as peer relationship struggles, bullying, the issue of male/female relationships, and fights with parents over their increasing need for independence (Knowles and Brown 2000). Many young adolescents experience low self-esteem, have a sense of egocentrism, are emotionally sensitive, and are frequently impulsive in their actions and words (Walsh 2004).

These attributes are most likely to occur during the school day; therefore, teachers must respond to these outbursts in a professional manner that diffuses students’ emotions and indicates their willingness to genuinely help students. Teachers need to offer time, either formally or informally, to listen to young adolescents in large group, small group, and individual settings. Active listening involves the following actions:

- Frequent eye contact
- Body positioning facing students
- Avoid passive listening (such as grading papers or reading while listening)
- Acknowledge responses such as nodding or saying, “I see”
- Rephrasing the student’s comments when she or he is finished
- Not interrupting the student while she or he is speaking (adapted from Charles 1999, 52)

Effective middle level teachers spend the first or last five minutes of class engaging students in conversations about their lives, interests, and families. They initiate discussions with individual students about nonacademic issues when not teaching. Some middle schools implement advisory sessions for the distinct purpose of encouraging the development of close bonds between students and one adult through small group meetings (Brown 2001). These conversations can diffuse the anxiety among young adolescents, and the simple activities previously discussed are actually critical to building cooperative relationships between students and teachers.

**Roadblocks to Effective Communication**

Teachers often inadvertently discourage communication with young adolescents by using traditional responses to their impulsive behaviors and comments. Englander described some of the communication roadblocks that teachers are apt to use:

- Ordering: “Sit down and stop asking that absurd question.”
- Moralizing: “Life isn’t supposed to be fair.”
- Interpreting: “I know what you’re feeling. You don’t have to tell me.”
- Reassuring: “I’m sure you’ll forget the entire incident by tomorrow.”
- Questioning: “Did you screw something up again?” (1986, 64)
On the surface, some of these responses appear to be the responsible behavior of caring adults. These roadblocks, unfortunately, send a clear message to young adolescents: “This person isn’t interested in hearing what I think, believe, or feel.” Englander called these comments “low respect” responses in which the person who uses them dominates the conversation by asking questions and giving advice, while trying to impose his or her own values and solutions (1986, 79).

The alternative to these traditional responses is “empathetic listening” (Charles 2000, 52). Charles described this as “getting inside the heads” of the students: “You make yourself aware not just of their words, but of their deeper hopes, fears, realities, and difficulties. The way to do this is to listen within the student’s frame of reference as child or adolescent rather than from your frame of reference as adult teacher”; perhaps best described as “(T)he student’s perception of reality” (52).

An advantage of listening rather than judging is that students begin to understand that they are responsible for reflecting on their behavior and resolving it themselves, rather than having teachers solve their problems. This leads to the process of students developing an internal locus of control; that is, they begin to perceive that they are responsible for their behavior, not someone else. This realization can encourage social growth as students begin internally reviewing how their actions affect others. This reflective process begins with teachers listening to students, rather than lecturing them. Empathetic listening sends this message to students: “I understand what you are experiencing, and I know how much this means to you.” Young adolescents are much more likely to cooperate when they recognize that teachers are actually hearing what they are saying.

**Genuine, Empathetic Responses**

Teachers who are interested in creating caring relationships with students use genuine, empathetic responses to their concerns. Effective communication that alleviates class behavior difficulties begins with initiating conversations with students privately rather than in front of peers. Many middle level teachers create their own management nightmares by initiating power struggles or arguments with students in front of an entire class. They all begin with simple sarcastic comments by teachers such as the one mentioned earlier in describing the student who was late for class: “Let me guess. You forgot where my classroom is.”

Here are a few responses, most that should be said in private, that demonstrate that teachers care about students:

- “I noticed you are late again. Is there anything I can do to help you get here on time? It means a lot to me to have you here when class begins.”
- “I see you do not have a pencil again. What can you do to solve this problem? Do you need my help in getting supplies?”
- “I need to speak to you after class about some missing homework assignments.”
- “Swearing is a common response to being embarrassed; however, it offends me and possibly others as well. Plus, it is not acceptable behavior in a public forum such as school. Can you think of something else to say when you are angry that is not so disrespectful?”
- “I am quite disappointed with those of you in this class who have continued to ignore my requests to complete homework. It is time we held a class meeting to discuss some solutions to this problem since this involves so many of you and it means so much to me.”

These responses may not sound natural to many educators because they diminish the traditional role that teachers play in reacting punitively to students’ behaviors instead of seeking solutions in a mutually respectful manner. Yet teachers who ignore these empathetic responses are likely to create more problems, rather than find permanent solutions to their difficulties.

**Culturally Responsive Communication**

Most teachers in American schools are Caucasians of European American descent (Ladson-Billings 2001). The way that most teachers speak to students, therefore, is based on the narrow perspective that students will respond in similar ways to the conversational style that these Caucasian teachers heard as children. Assuming that culturally and ethnically diverse and low socioeconomic students will respond appropriately to your communication style can create a number of management difficulties for Caucasian educators working in diverse communities.

An example of the confusion that often occurs for diverse students is teachers’ use of a common phrase at the beginning of class such as, “It is about time we get started.” For most teachers, this comment implies that students should sit at their desks, take out their assignments, and wait quietly for the teacher to begin speaking. This is not a very direct way of saying what one expects students to do at this moment, yet most suburban students will immediately react to this request. Heath (1983) reported that children from working class families had difficulty following these types of indirect requests because their parents were much more explicit in what they expected their children to do.

A more authoritative request is required with many low socioeconomic students if teachers expect them to respond appropriately. Many teachers begin to lose patience with students who do not respond immediately to their requests. Teachers who react punitively in this situation create an adversarial relationship with students who are confused about the teacher’s expectations.
Delpit (1995) noted that many African American students in urban environments expect the teacher to act with great authority, rather than speaking less assertively. When teachers fail to use explicit requests, some African American students perceive them as being weak and undeserving of their respect. Again, an assertive style of speaking and an authoritative demeanor is required for teachers to maintain appropriate relationships with many students in diverse classrooms.

European American teachers who plan class discussions expect students to follow the rules of raising their hands and speaking one at a time. Gay (2000) explained that many African American and Chicano students prefer a more open discussion format in which students engage in a discussion using loud emotional comments shouted while someone else is speaking. In this conversational style known as “call-response,” many side conversations are occurring while students are also listening to the student who first spoke. Recognizing these emotional responses and permitting students to speak concurrently in these situations is an appropriate response to this type of student engagement. Teachers can save time at the end of class to have students summarize the many opinions expressed, while focusing on the intended outcome for the lesson during a later class.

Cultural responsiveness to different communication styles is required for teachers to maintain harmonious relationships with their diverse students (Brown 2002). These behaviors must be learned by teachers who enter diverse environments if they expect to establish an effective learning climate.

Conclusion

Managing students is not an exact science. It never was, nor will it ever be, due to the nature of children and adolescents. It is clear, however, that building relationships with students begins on the first day of school as each student studies the facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and comments that emanate from their teachers. Young adolescents are watching and deciding through these constant verbal and nonverbal messages whether this teacher cares about them personally. Most students choose to engage in a mutually respectful relationship when they discover that their teacher does care about them, and demonstrates that through regular displays of empathetic listening and genuine concern. The result of being aware of and responding to students’ communication needs is a classroom in which the opportunities for genuine academic growth are greatly increased.

Key words: congruent communication, adolescence, response

REFERENCES