

Can we motivate students through non-verbal communication?

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Description of the results of implementation of Grinder's non-verbal model in secondary schools, Barcelona, Spain:

1. Material to observe 8 ways of non-verbal communication to engage and motivate students. (Grinder, 2004)

1. Both Cats and Dogs Need Paws (pause)

* When the first teacher spoke in class, I noticed that her speech was very fluent. She also paused many times as she was communicating with the class. When she paused, she seemed very comfortable and relaxed. I realized that she did this most of the time when she said something important. This often led to questions or comments from the class, who seemed to be engaged.

* When the second teacher spoke to the class, I realized that her speech was not so fluent. She spoke very slowly and used many pauses. She looked very serious while teaching. She did not have a very strong voice, so students at the back had to pay attention to what was said. Her low monotone voice in combination with the pauses made some students listen and participate. But many were easily distracted.

* The third teacher was speaking very fast, she did not give herself any breaks to take a pause. She did not seem comfortable at all. The class was speaking all the time, an observation that I had not witnessed yet with this class. She did not feel at ease due to the noise, so she got angry. When she got angry she did use the pause in a good way. "If you are not quiet now, you will be sent to the headmaster..." The information sank in with the students: suddenly they were paying attention and engaged.

2. Frozen Hand Gesture

* The first teacher used her hands a lot while speaking. She used her arms not only to clarify her messages but also to involve the class. During one of her lessons she used the blackboard to explain some grammar. When students were doing the exercise, a student asked a question in class. She would use the frozen hand and point at the board without talking: the student had time to think and realized what he had to do.

* The second teacher did not seem to be very keen on using hand gestures. But when she used them, she used them correctly to explain what she was saying. When she summed up some points, she used the frozen hand gesture. Students seemed to understand it and they wrote everything down.

* The third teacher however made too many hand gestures and explained too fast. The students were not able to create a picture of what she was saying. This happens often to teachers who are worried about the listeners' interrupting. The students disconnected fast and were not as engaged as with the other two teachers.

3. High Expectations

* The first teacher often had one forearm at her side while the other arm was parallel to the ground. In the arm at her side, she sometimes had a book in her hand, which made clear that students were going to do exercises from the book. Students seemed engaged.

* The second teacher most of the time had both arms parallel to the ground. When she was speaking, she would sometimes use her hands to clarify her message in combination with a pretty slow voice. In this case, students seemed to pay attention as well.

* The third teacher often had her arms akimbo and sometimes folded across her chest. She seemed to operate from an authoritarian position with approachable gestures, intending to maintain order. It did not seem to increase her charismatic leadership.

4. Breathe through the Nose

* The first teacher often used pauses in which she closed her lips. According to Grinder, (2004) this makes the teacher look more intelligent. When she was angry she would keep her head and hands still and frown towards the person who had done something wrong. It was very effective.

* The second teacher did not vary a lot in the pitch of her voice, but her pauses in combination with breathing through her nose seemed to work. I remember her saying in a normal voice "If you are not quiet now, I am afraid you have to leave", she stared at the person, standing still and with her lips closed. It seemed to work.

* The third teacher did not take many breaks during her speech. But when she listened to the students she often had her mouth open. According to Grinder (2004) this has a negative influence. When students asked something, many students were talking to each other.

5. To Join or Not to Join

* The first teacher often joined contents: she loves to move around the class while explaining. Most of the students paid attention to her. When explaining negative information she would take a break. After these breaks she would go to another place. Students did not take this in a bad way.

* The second teacher did not move a lot, she might have passed in front of the blackboard only a few times. However, when she explained something negative, she would take a break as well. But she would not move, instead she would look around to see if somebody disagreed, which by the look on her face, would be a bad idea.

* The third teacher moved around the class but she did not simultaneously speak and move at the end of a pause. This seemed to confuse the students as she went from one topic to the other. When sharing a negative content, she did not separate it before the pause from the positive or neutral content after the pause. I could see how students got distracted and even associated her with the bad news. (Which in this case were low exam grades.)

6. Voice Patterns and Breathing

* The first teacher made the students feel safe, because she was clearly in control of the situation. She knew exactly how to use a credible and an approachable voice when it was necessary. Students seemed engaged when she put on her approachable voice: her voice gave the impression that she was looking for their input. But even when she used a credible voice to send important messages, her students listened carefully and collaborated.

* The second teacher however, used a credible voice and a low breathing pattern almost all the time. She held her head still so that the voice was flat and her intonation curled down. However, this did not make her approachable at all, and it had a negative influence on the participation of the students. They did not seem to be willing to cooperate.

* The third teacher had a high/shallow breathing pattern while she was speaking. Her approachable voice pattern and shallow breathing made her look insecure. The students seemed to observe this indirectly as well and did not seem to care when she got angry.

7. Recovery

* The first teacher let her students be creative, she loved to give them only a little bit of information and let them do the exercise. She combined this with her powerful way of standing in "high expectations". This seemed to motivate the students as they all seemed engaged.

* The second teacher seemed very conservative. She gave a guided lesson and talked a lot. Even though she used her powerful way of standing, she did not seem to engage the students. Many were not listening and I had the impression that those who did participate felt obliged.

* The third teacher also gave a guided lesson, probably because she did not feel really secure. She planned a lot for the students and then let them do the exercise. This did not seem to motivate them, and due to her approachable voice, many students thought the exercises were optional.

8. Congruency

* The first teacher was able to deliver bad news using almost all the required aspects of non-verbal communication: she made eye contact, did not blink, used short phrases and sentences to transmit her idea, used longer pauses, stood still and breathed through her nose. She did not use a whispery voice. You could see the students really bought her message and were engaged.

* The second teacher also used most of these aspects: She made eye contact, did not blink, used short phrases and sentences, paused often and longer than normal and did not move. This seemed to engage the students.

* The third teacher had more difficulties when sharing negative news, because she is more approachable than credible. She made eye contact, did not blink and stood still. However, she did not use short sentences or pauses and she kept on using chaotic gestures without using a whispery voice. The students were not engaged at all.

What can we conclude from this observation? First of all, we could see that the eight non-verbal skills were engaging. The first teacher, who used almost all of the eight non-verbal skills perfectly, was able to engage all the students. They were on task and collaborated. The students from the third teacher, who did not use the skills, made a lot of noise, talked to each other and were not engaged. The second teacher however, used some nonverbal skills, but she did not seem to engage the students.