
Methods of Attracting the Attention and Interest of Pupils and Students: Successful Teacher Skills

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Date of publication (dd/mm/yyyy): 18/02/2021

Abstract – In this article the concept of teaching is approached as an art of verbal and non-verbal communication, linked to a particular skillset that can assist them in their success as teachers. Specifically, we study the methods teachers can use to become better communicators, and even performers, so that their multiple actions in the classroom can attract the interest of their students. We discuss here a variety of skills that a teacher needs to be efficient, while expanding on verbal and non-verbal ones, such as the use of hand and facial gestures, the appropriate speed and volume of voice, etc. This article examines the skills teachers need to acquire in order to give attractive and effective lessons to their students, so that the latter can better understand what is being taught. Teaching here is seen as a type of interactive performing act, during which the teachers have to do everything in their power to transfer their knowledge to their students-listeners-spectators (Tauber and Mesner, 2010: 14). Thus, this article is divided into 3 (three) major sections: (a) Teaching as a profession, and the role of university and other training facilities; (b) Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and (c) The communication skills of a teacher in a classroom in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication.

Keywords – Teaching Methods, Communicative Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Intrapersonal Skills, Performance, Education, Classroom, Professors, Teachers.

I. INTRODUCTION

The education system in many countries is based on out-of-date pedagogical methods, where the teacher is speaking from the desk and the pupils/students are listening without interacting to anything that is being said, unless they are asked to pose questions or make comments. Such education renders students indifferent and gradually makes them enemies of the pedagogical system, but also of the spaces where teaching takes place. Thus, our research was based on contemporary sources of knowledge regarding contemporary teaching, i.e. those that refer to the views of the pupils and students concerning the ways of teaching that teachers and professors follow. We studied books of recent publication (2019 - 2020) and articles of the last 2 years, which analyse the issue of the teacher/professor attracting the interest of pupils/students.

The classroom is a space where teachers and students interact with each other in the hope of creating shared meanings. Teachers are the ones who are traditionally responsible for transmitting knowledge and experience, while students are the receivers. This is a “direct transmission” view of learning, which “implies that a ‘teachers’ role is to communicate knowledge in a clear and structured way, to explain correct solutions, to give students clear and resolvable problems, and to ensure calm and concentration in the classroom” (OECD, 2009: 92). Despite constructivist views which see the students as active participants, many teachers still rely on the first and most traditional paradigm for the most part of their teaching. Whether experienced or novice, teachers are, to a great extent, communicators, occupying a specific space with a specific role: to teach their students. As McLaren (1988) states, the teacher who uses performative techniques considers teaching to be “an essentially

improvised drama that takes place within a curricular narrative” (1988:174). In order to be successful in this role, specific qualities are required on the teachers’ part that will enhance their performance. This task is similar to that of actors on stage attempting to convey a message to their audience through their body and voice. Certainly, teachers have an additional duty, i.e. to find the optimal way to help their students better understand the material discussed in a lesson. In this quest, there are methods that will assist them, as well as challenges that they will have to face.

II. METHODOLOGY

Our efforts were based on the comparison of teaching to the art of theatre and the principles of performing on stage. We examined whether all theories of theatre and especially those concerning role playing can be applied to teaching in a classroom. Therefore, we studied articles and books that analyse the key principles of acting in front of an audience and, in parallel, assessed whether they can be applied by professors or teachers in their courses. In these articles we focused on the voice and gestures of a teacher who wants to attract the attention of his students by what he says and how he speaks to them, comparing these two elements to the major principles of acting on a theatre stage.

Another method used for the purposes of this article was the observation of teachers at work, carried out by the authors during the academic years 2017-20. These observations concerned the methods that teachers and professors use in order to attract the attention of their students. We evaluated the positive and negative parts of their teaching methods, and tried to find relevant solutions in the books mentioned in our bibliography.

Teaching as a Profession

Promoting learning is the primary reason that schools exist, while the teachers are the facilitators of this process (Cohen et al, 2010: 52). One could say that there are 3 (three) types of teachers in terms of their aspiration to teach: (a) Those who believe that the classroom is a space for them to do a personal psychotherapy session: they unload all their personal troubles to their students, who are forced to listen; (b) Those who decided to become teachers because they had no better alternative, and have little interest in the actual science; and (c) Those who are aware that what they say or do will benefit their trainees. Especially in adult classrooms, students come to classes devoting a significant amount of personal time that could easily be spent elsewhere, so teachers should do anything they can to make sure that their students’ effort is not wasted.

The role of Pedagogical Schools

The so-called “teaching” schools, that is, the schools that “bring out” graduates destined to teach, should also be mentioned. How have they trained their students? Have they given them basic communication skills? And, if so, in what way? Which professors consider teaching as performing? A teaching practicum is perhaps the most essential part of educating a teacher, and the links between performance methodology and teacher training are very strong (Pineau, 1994:17). But such modules are not offered by all Universities. There are teachers who go into secondary and tertiary education having received no teacher training whatsoever, especially those who graduated before 2010. The Ministry of Education in Greece tried to solve this issue by establishing the adult so-called SELETE (today ASPAITE) schools. Those are intended to teach the principles of pedagogy to graduates of faculties which do not typically include educational modules, as for example Life sciences, Engineering Schools, etc (Bigge & Shermis, 2012: 216). However, graduates of schools such as Physical Sciences or Social

Sciences did not use to have this requirement. Most teachers in Greek secondary schools have received no form of teacher training during their years at university. It should be noted here that these post-graduate schools are not obligatory for private school teachers and tutors (in greek language: frontistiria / “cram schools”), or university teachers; they are only required if one wishes to enter the public school system.

Undoubtedly, teaching is a complex technique that requires knowledge, skills and talent. This means that certain individuals can become effective teachers in a classroom without having specialised in pedagogy, while others, no matter how many teacher training lessons they attend, will never become successful teachers. In this light one could say that many prospective teachers are not going to improve or even “touch” the level of successful teaching. Very few teachers have this innate attribute, what we call “talent”: the unique privilege of carrying out, effortlessly, a very good lesson that also brings joy to the classroom, to almost all of their students.

Talented Teachers vs Talented Professionals

This is a great misunderstanding throughout Education: an excellent musician (or doctor, engineer, nurse etc.) is automatically a successful teacher! This is not the case, as the pre-eminence of a person in an art or activity - even if it is long-lasting, or on a global scale - does not imply that he or she can teach and impart knowledge to students at any level. The individuals who manage various educational institutions do not bear this in mind and often invite great artists to teach, for example, music to their advanced students. Sooner or later, they will realise that these great artists are not necessarily good educators. Moreover, they may be rude or off-putting, thus defeating the whole purpose. Institutions often invite these great artists or scientists in order to gain prestige and fame; however, they forget the original purpose, i.e. teaching the students.

Successful Teacher Criteria

Who is, really, a successful teacher in the classroom, and based on what criteria? We say “in the classroom” here, because, especially in academia, there are other criteria in place, such as doing research, writing articles and books; these activities are not identical to the actual teaching praxis. Writing good scientific articles and books does not mean that one is good at teaching, and this is a huge misunderstanding that has been governing tertiary education for many years. Certainly, the question “Who is a successful teacher?” is very complex. The same teacher may be considered excellent by one student and terrible by another, as students have different learning styles and preferences. In that context, very strict and uninspiring teachers, may have a great wealth of knowledge that they can impart on students so that they get good test scores. But can they be called “successful”?

III. BASIC SKILLS

Following the above, we could suggest that the teachers’ actions to make their lesson effective and to better transmit their “message” are initially divided into three categories:

- a. Improving their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.
- b. Improving their communication skills.
- c. Improving their knowledge and the teaching material/content.

We will not address the second major category here, as it lies beyond the scope of this article. However, it sh-

ould be noted that most teachers follow the instructions of the Ministry of Education, while some of them seek to enhance their knowledge through personal research or continuing education seminars. The Ministry, depending on the goals and mentality of the government in place, sets syllabi for elementary, junior, and high school courses (thankfully not for University courses - although in some cases they should) (Gargalianos, 2019: 67). This may have a negative effect on teachers who, for example speak or think slowly, or those who want to develop a more experiential style of teaching. Unfortunately, the set material usually requires rote learning from students, but, again, this is not the subject of this article.

A. Improving Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Skills

1. Interpersonal Skills

If teachers are aggressive and/or have a poor relationship with their students, helping them get high test scores will not make the students think of them in a positive light. The same will be true for those who have very low confidence, which will make the students distrust them and manner of teaching. When teachers are (or appear to be) confident, students are more inclined to listen to what they have to say, as the former will seem more credible and reliable. The same is true for staying calm under pressure; teachers who shout a lot, and especially those who lose their temper, automatically lose their students' attention and perhaps their respect. Teachers should try to express themselves calmly in difficult situations, perhaps by taking a few breaths, and then talking in a firm and steady voice, while assuming a body posture that projects power. This will be especially helpful with younger students or difficult classes where classroom management is a necessary skill.

It is also essential for teachers to be on good terms with the individuals they teach, so that the classroom can be a safe and positive learning space. Here, the teachers should be more relaxed and friendly, as reflected in their posture, a more mellow voice, a warm smile, and a friendly attitude. Carnicke reminds us that Stanislavski thought of tension as “the greatest enemy” of creativity, as it paralyzes and distorts the body, while also prohibiting concentration (2010: 8). Moreover, teachers who wish to build a positive classroom environment will try to motivate their students using verbal and non-verbal cues such as nods, or expressions of encouragement.

2. Intrapersonal Skills

Pupils and students of all ages can immediately understand if teachers or professors have what one would call “a bad day”, or whether they do not really want to be in the classroom. Unfortunately, there are several such teachers, in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Many teachers feel bored at times, while others are constantly tired and indifferent to their function. This situation may be due to the fact that these teachers did not want to become teachers and enter classrooms (Gargalianos, o.p.: 98). In this case, the teachers will most probably be less than successful in their profession. As Hargreaves notes, “good teaching is not just a matter of being efficient, developing competence, mastering technique, and possessing the right kind of knowledge. Good teaching also involves emotional work. It is infused with pleasure, passion, creativity, challenge and joy [...] it is a passionate vocation” (1997: 12).

Others might have had negative experiences in the beginning of their careers, with students showing disrespect or being ironic towards them, and this has had a negative effect on them. So, they may have got to a point where they no longer wish to be teachers, but there is no alternative career path for them.

Additionally, there are many teachers who have got older and “heavier”, and this is a factor that should be taken into consideration, especially in classrooms with very young students. Younger students need more energy from the teachers, but economic needs force teachers to keep working long after they would wish to.

There are many issues that influence a teacher’s performance, and one of them is anxiety, which could stem from personal and/or economic problems. What teachers can do is find ways to achieve relaxation before their lessons. Like Schreiber describes in reference to an actor’s preparation, relaxation “is not immediate... but requires backing off from the events of the day, releasing tension, and dropping into the full instrument-the body, the voice, and the focus of the mind-to get ready to work (2005:23). Using any type of relaxation technique they prefer, teachers can gather all their positive energy and release it for the sake of their students and, of course, themselves.

3. *Organisational Skills*

Successful teachers are also be well organised in the classroom and this skill is linked both to the relation to their students and to themselves. The teachers who are constantly ill-prepared and do not use their lesson time and resources successfully will most certainly lose the students’ respect as well, and they will most probably have class management issues. No matter if they talk eloquently or are well dressed, the teachers who show continuous disregard for the subject they are teaching will face the same disregard from their students. Good organisational skills are essential for teachers. Being organised shows professionalism, and this, in turn, earns students’ respect. Is this a communicative skill? In a way it is, because being a well-organised teacher also means being a good communicator. Teachers who are not organised are, somewhat, off-role, and certainly poor role models for their students.

An essential part of being organised in the educational arena entails carefully planning a lesson. This might take time, but it is the best way to make sure that a lesson will have flow and cohesion, and that it will keep the students interested. Students are inclined to prefer lessons that are interactive, creative, and entertaining. Although this cannot be the case every time, teachers who want to attract their students’ attention and create a positive learning atmosphere could include in their lesson plans visual aids, games that are relevant to their subject, interactive creative activities, group activities, and any other activity their students are drawn to. In this way, the teachers are building their “performance” material beforehand, and they are well prepared for any challenge they will have to face during class time. Thus, a good lesson “planner” will be a good improviser, as there are almost always distractions in a classroom. Improvising in the classroom is a skill that requires a lot of practice and can only be built through time and effort, with the teacher resembling an actor who needs to improvise in front of an audience.

B. *Improving Communication Skills*

In category “b” we have the following subcategories:

1. How teachers move (non-verbal communication)
2. How teachers speak or stay silent (verbal communication)

1. *Non-verbal Communication*

Facial Expressions and Posture

It is not enough for a teacher to simply walk into a classroom, nor simply to speak. Every lesson, every talk, every text should be accompanied by facial and hand expressions. Facial expressions are perhaps simpler and more widely used. A good example is smiles, which are very welcome from students, of course not all the time, and depending on the lesson. In general, a teacher could make a variety of appropriate faces, as long as they are part of the course and serve a specific purpose, for example in reference to a specific chapter. Teachers should also move about the classroom and interact with as many students as possible. Sitting for a whole hour, or simply writing on the board will most probably tire the students. Eye contact is also an essential part of successful communication, and will make the lesson more direct and comprehensible. Meyerhold insisted on the supremacy of the “scenic movement” of the actor, which would determine both emotions and speech (Leach, 2010:29). In the case of actors, facial expression and posture depends on the role and the director’s approach; teachers, however, have to “direct” themselves and build their own role.

Hand Gestures

Teachers can, and should, move their hands so that they can better convey to their students what they want to say. Their gestures increase the expressiveness of what they say to an audience and make their lesson more attractive. The audience should be able to see speakers move their hands - depending on what they say - in order to better understand what they are listening to. Hand gestures and all non-verbal movements are, in a way, teachers’ visual and kinesthetic aids, as they try to attract the attention of their audience, without tiring them. All this visual/kinesthetic input renders the teachers social communicators as well as performers, who have an important goal: to help their audience in their learning process. As Lowman noted, “classrooms are fundamentally arenas in which the teacher is the focal point, just as the actor or orator is on a stage - teaching is undeniably a performing art” (1984: 11).

2. Verbal Communication

Speech Volume

First, we should note that all educators -as well as anyone who speaks in front of a public- should learn to speak from the diaphragm. This is a membrane between the lungs and the abdomen, which "pushes" the air from the abdomen to the lungs, and then to the larynx and the oral cavity. In order to use the diaphragm correctly, one must go through special training in their schools or with specialised teachers. This technique relaxes the speakers and allows them to speak for more time without getting tired. It also relaxes the lungs.

At the same time, the question arises of how loud a teacher’s voice should be. Before each lesson begins, teachers should see how far the last student sits and find the appropriate volume. If they teach in a large auditorium with dozens of rows, they should speak loud enough for the student in the upper row, without annoying the students sitting in the front seats (Altrichter & Posch & Somekh, 2001: 251).

They should also speak loudly in cases of coughing, sneezing or any disturbing noises, and even repeat what they have just said, in case they were not heard. That said, as teachers are “susceptible to problems of vocal health”, they should drink lots of fluids to stay hydrated, and stay silent when they have a sore throat (Tauber and Mester, o.p.: 46).

Listening

A good teacher should listen to everything in the classroom; every sound, every noise, everything that can be heard. Sighs, laughter, or whispers could be interpreted as signs from students. Teachers should also listen to what is happening outside the classroom. All these sounds are breaths of life and sources of inspiration. They could also take advantage of all this to bring their lesson to life. Additionally, effective teachers are active and respectful listeners. They may nod their head, encourage students to talk, and always listen to their students and respond respectfully, even if what the students say is “incorrect” or inappropriate. Active listening is a great communicative technique, which distinguishes an actor’s performance from a teacher’s. Actors rarely need to be listeners, while teachers need to show that they are listening to their students in both a verbal and non-verbal manner, as for example by nodding their heads.

Speech Rate

A teacher’s rate of speech is also an important issue. Too slow can drive students to sleep while too fast might impede understanding; the solution lies somewhere in between. There is also the case of alternating speech pace, that is, teachers could sometimes speak slowly and sometimes fast, and this is aimed at diversifying verbal expressions and, consequently, attracting attention from learners.

It is evident that speaking in a high speed gets in the way of being fully understood by others. It might cause teachers to not enunciate correctly and not speak clearly. Often, we hurry to cover the reading material as soon as possible, and, in doing so, omit pauses between our phrases. Therefore, with specialised training, we can understand that we should speak at the right speed, depending on the circumstances, i.e. the place, the subject matter, and the audience.

Silences

Teachers do not need to talk constantly. They can even “speak” with their silence. Silences say more than words themselves. A lesson is not just words, but also pauses, silences, breaths, looks, provided that students pay more attention to the teacher when he or she stops talking (Gargalianos, o.p.: 34). In fact, “a well-placed pause can do wonders to stimulate participation”, as it gives students time to form their thoughts (Tauber and Mester, 2010: 155).

A particular case is the silence of embarrassment, that is, when neither side has anything to say, either because a difficult question has been asked or because the learners are absent-minded. Such occurrences could probably ruin the rhythm and cohesion of the lesson, and eventually disrupt or tire everyone. They are accompanied by equally silent looks: one looks at the other in wonder or despair. An experienced teacher can accept these silences and not let them “take over” the classroom. On the other hand, silences can become a useful tool, especially in primary and secondary education, as part of a “focusing” technique used by the teacher to calm the students. These silences are a type of one minute “brain breaks”, where both students and teacher gather their thoughts and continue the lesson with recovered energy.

IV. CONCLUSION

If it is to be done successfully, teaching is a very demanding art, not unlike that of a good actor. “At first glance, performing a role - acting a part - may appear out of place to some educators. It shouldn’t” (Tauber and Mesner, o.p.: 14). Successful teaching is indeed a performance, and a competent teacher desires to teach because

he or she loves teaching itself, and not in order to serve other purposes. Talent is important, especially since teachers are usually not properly trained to teach before an audience. The presence of the teacher in a classroom is based on good communication skills and good knowledge of the subject they are teaching. Teachers have to handle these skills very well in order not to tire their students, but also to deliver understandable lessons to them. The teacher's body must have particular strengths and abilities, because teaching is a complex and demanding process, very close to a performing act. The teacher's voice should also have certain qualities that will make his or her lesson “heard” and understood. Teachers also have to take care of other, equally important issues, such as their relationship with their students and the organisation of their lesson or course. All of the above need to be carefully balanced, so that the lesson that is delivered is the best lesson possible for both those who teach, and those who are being taught.

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