

INSIDE THE LAB/OUTSIDE THE BOX: INTERPRETING NONVERBAL MESSAGES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The Dr. Mary A. Lynch Communication Lab at Cape Breton University is the first lab of its kind and the longest running lab in North America. A mandatory requirement of our introductory Communication classes, the weekly experiential learning lab sessions help students understand concepts, increase their self-awareness and effectiveness as communicators, understand cross-cultural perspectives, retain the theory learned in class, and develop their communication skills cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally, through small-group discussions, experiential learning activities, and critically reflective written journals. This paper provides a history of the Dr. Mary A. Lynch Communication Lab, explains the purpose and methodology of the lab, and how our pedagogical approach demonstrates teaching outside the box. Nonverbal communication accounts for the majority of the messages we send. It's also the primary way we construct and send messages about our identity unique to contexts and cultures. Educators and students are constantly sending and interpreting nonverbal cues. This paper explores the nine forms of nonverbal behaviours as presented as a critical reflection activity to participants at the Atlantic Universities' Teaching Showcase and is representative of an activity delivered in the Communication Lab. Included are the questions posed to participants and a summary of the discussion surrounding each form of nonverbal messages in the context of the teaching and learning environment.

Introduction

The Dr. Mary A. Lynch Communication Lab at Cape Breton University is approaching its 50th year in operation. A requirement in our introductory classes, the weekly lab sessions encourage students to reflect on their communication behaviours and that of those around them. Our mode of delivery helps students increase their confidence, retain information, express ideas clearly, understand different perspectives, and expand their worldview, while participating in experiential learning.

In this paper, we provide background information about the Communication Lab, explain how our purpose and methodology demonstrate teaching outside the box, how the labs are run, why they are effective, and how we maintain the integrity of the lab while striving to adapt to ever-changing communication systems. To demonstrate how we present concepts and theories in the Communication Lab, we discuss the nine forms of nonverbal behaviours as they relate to the teaching and learning environment through a critical reflection activity presented at the Teaching Showcase. The style of this activity is reflective of one we may deliver in our labs—demonstrating the value of experiential learning, while asking participants to critically reflect on their own teaching environments through nonverbal

communication. We met with a group of colleagues from across institutions and disciplines to discuss these messages and what we found was that although there are many differences among our teaching practices, subjects, and environments, we share one thing in common—nonverbal communication influences our teaching and learning.

History

In 1965, Dr. Mary A. Lynch was teaching Speech Communication at Xavier Junior College when her students asked to have a place to practice their speeches without her being present. Dr. Lynch cleared out a broom closet and thus began the Communication Lab, making our lab the longest running and most developed in North America (Rolls, 1998). A new space was provided in 1967, and again in 1972, the first year that Dr. Lynch used student helpers (known today as Communication Lab Peer Facilitators). In 1979, the lab was moved to the College of Cape Breton campus (now known as Cape Breton University), after which time Dr. Lynch persevered to establish the Communication Lab as an adjunct to the basic communication courses in interpersonal and public communication. In September 2001, the lab was moved to its present location at CBU and unveiled as the "Dr. Mary A. Lynch Communication Lab" in honour of its founder. After almost 50 years in operation, we continue to build on the foundation Dr. Lynch created and explore new ways to deliver material and engage in experiential learning with students.

Purpose & Methodology

People learn best by doing (Arnold & McClure, 1996). The pedagogical approach we take in the Communication Lab is learning by doing, or experiential learning. Students respond positively to this approach and different learning styles are accommodated through this type of teaching and learning.

The Communication Lab is a required component of Communication 1103: Interpersonal Communication, Communication 1105: Public Communication, and Communication 2175: Issues in Media Studies. The purpose of the experiential learning lab is to reinforce what the students are learning in class and to help them reach their cognitive, affective and behavioural goals. Through small group discussion, role-playing, and videotaped activities, the lab complements the class, but is a unique experience for the students. The lab is designed to be a comfortable, relaxing environment that is conducive to discussion and participation. Students have stated that attending the lab is a major contributor to their success in the class. Approximately 50 labs are scheduled each semester and are facilitated by a Lab Instructor or a Communication Lab Peer Facilitator. Labs consist of five to seven students, and provide the small group environment that nurtures sharing of experience, critical reflection, and fosters peer-to-peer relationships. Research and personal experience of researchers and ourselves, as students and educators, suggest that students can learn effectively from one another proving the educational value of students helping students (Rolls, 1993; Brann-Barrett & Sulliman, 2001). The underlying concept is that students seek advice from and are influenced by the expectations, attitudes, and behaviors of their peer group. Peer influence in many situations may be stronger than that of adults such as teachers, parents, and other experts (Mellanby, Rees, & Tripp, 2000).

We use different forms of social media, artwork, commercials and print ads, video clips from movies and television series', and other forms of media in the labs to demonstrate concepts, show relevant and timely examples, and support the lessons we are delivering. Students positively respond to this method, and once comfortable, may suggest videos or provide examples we could use in lab. Through these methods, students are better able to increase their awareness of the communication concepts and theories in their daily lives, relationships, and in popular culture. They can then express this awareness in the lab while increasing their cognitive, affective and behavioural development. Through participation in lab and written journals we ask students what they have learned (cognitive), how they may be feeling in various communication situations (affective), and how they assess their own communication skills, and the skills of others (behavioural). Through this critical reflection process students are able to understand and adapt their own communication patterns in various situations.

Communication Lab Peer Facilitators

Students who demonstrate excellence in required courses are encouraged to enroll in a training course followed by a 160-hour practicum in order to become Communication Lab Peer Facilitators. The practicum gives students hands on experience facilitating three labs per week. The systematic training and supervision the students receive in these courses creates skilled, well-equipped facilitators able to lead small groups of students through the weekly lab sessions. After the successful completion of the practicum, a student may be hired as a facilitator for the following academic year.

Peer Facilitators play a vital role in helping students reach their cognitive, affective, and behavioural goals. Through empathetic listening, using focusing, encouraging, and reflecting skills, as well as confirming messages, facilitators are able to build relationships with students and increase their level of involvement in the lab (Cuny, Wilde, & Stevens, 2012). While no one should ever be pressured to speak, small-group discussions usually allow even the most timid to contribute (Arnold & McClure, 1996). Peer Facilitators possess qualities such as emotional intelligence, empathy, credibility, and trustworthiness that encourage students to disclose their thoughts and vulnerabilities more easily. (Ward & Schwartzman, 2009).

The Peer Facilitators' role involves facilitating regularly scheduled, 50-minute labs and delivering a prepared lesson plan provided in advance from the Communication Lab Coordinator. Facilitators distribute journals to students throughout the year and are responsible for reviewing, responding to, assessing, and recording these assignments. This is one of the main ways we encourage peer-to-peer learning inside the lab. Facilitators are instrumental in helping students develop their communication skills and the personal rewards are immense: they gain invaluable experience by facilitating in the educational setting. This work is helpful for students planning to continue into teaching, counseling, or other fields where individual responsibility, leadership skills, and initiative are important. Some qualities our Facilitators require are excellent interpersonal and public communication skills, demonstrated leadership and organizational skills, the ability and desire to assess students fairly, excellent time and conflict management skills, and an understanding of small group dynamics (Brann-Barrett & White, 2014).

Student Assessment

The Communication Lab component is worth a total of 20% of the students' final grade for their COMM1103, COMM1105, and COMM2175 courses. The labs are a mandatory component and students are required to attend lab each week for ten weeks in order to take part in regularly scheduled experiential learning activities and discussions. 10% of their ongoing assessment is based on the willingness and quality of participation, general attitude and sensitivity to others, ability to integrate theory with real life communication experiences, and personal growth and development. Final Assessment Guides are completed at the end of each semester for every lab student. The guide is broken down into cognitive, affective, and behavioural sections, and includes critical reflection questions to be answered by the students' facilitator. Facilitators assess their peers' progress and suggest a mark based on this experience. At the end of the semester, facilitators meet with the Lab Coordinator to discuss each assessment. The Coordinator evaluates these assessments and submits the final lab grade.

Lab students complete two question-and-answer critical reflection journals designed to increase their awareness and effectiveness as communicators. Journals are worth 10% of their final grade and are assessed using a Journal Assessment Guide, a checklist based on completeness of descriptions, depth of entries, ability to apply communication principles and concepts, ability to self-disclose, and the overall degree of effort. Student journals and assessment guides are submitted to the Lab Coordinator for evaluation at the end of the semester.

To monitor students' development throughout the term, instructors and facilitators write weekly log reports. A log template is provided to Peer Facilitators that includes a list of critical reflection questions to be considered in their reports. Peer Facilitators are required to regularly submit these documents to the Lab Coordinator for review. The logs are instrumental in the student assessment process, since students' behaviour, participation, progress, and development is tracked regularly.

Critical Reflection Activity

To demonstrate how we teach outside the box in the Communication Lab and share some of the theories we present in our classes, we adapted a lab activity for our session. Mirroring how we facilitate our labs, we first discussed our topic and then asked for input from the group, encouraging the participants to relate theory to personal experience. With provided notebooks, we invited participants to walk around the room and look at the nine forms of nonverbal communication we had posted on the walls, each having corresponding critical reflection questions. Some participants worked on their own, jotting down notes, while others paired up, talking about the questions together. We decided the best way to enhance, but not influence, our participants' contributions to the discussion would be by providing them with the terminology and definitions of the nonverbal forms being discussed. After some time to consider the questions, we explored the nine forms of nonverbal communication through a facilitated group discussion. Bringing the participants back to the larger group gave everyone the ability to share their experiences, discuss what nonverbal cues they may or may not be recognizing, and how this may be affecting their teaching and their students' learning.

All participants were attentive and thoughtful in this process, they were encouraged to be open and speak freely, and the conversation flowed easily. One of the most common topics discussed amongst participants was how commonly nonverbal cues are misunderstood across cultures and how easily influenced we may be based on our own perceptions and those of our students. Having the opportunity to discuss nonverbal communication in this way allowed our participants to critically reflect on their own teaching practices and environments while experiencing how we teach outside the box.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication accounts for 65 to 93% of the meaning of a message (Birdwhistell, 1970; Mehrabian, 1981). Intentionally or unintentionally, it is the primary way we construct and send messages about our identity unique to contexts, cultures, and the nature of our relationships. Nonverbal communication is continuous and ongoing, therefore our nonverbal messages are the reasons for the principle “we cannot not communicate” (Wood, Sept, & Duncan, 1998, p. 29). Because of the ambiguous nature of nonverbal communication, it is important not to read or interpret only a single cue, but to look at the whole picture. Keeping an open mind and not jumping to conclusions is essential (Adler, Rolls, & Proctor II, 2015). People communicate nonverbally through nine forms, and through posted questions we asked our participants to consider these forms in the context of the teaching and learning environment. Keep in mind they often overlap and many of them are in play at once (Corbin & White, 2009).

1. Kinesics—*Body position, body language, motions, facial features, eye contact*

- What is your perception of students who do not make eye contact?
- How do you feel when a student's facial expressions or body language displays disinterest?
- How do you nonverbally block/encourage students?

Kinesics is the most commonly thought of form of nonverbal communication and the one that can lead to the most misinterpretations. The group spent a good deal of time discussing eye contact in particular, and the cultural differences involved with this nonverbal behaviour. Increasing our awareness of different cultural interpretations of kinesics, including gestures and eye contact, can create a more effective teaching and learning environment. Another aspect we should consider is communicating with those with neurodevelopmental disorders such as Asperger syndrome, as there can be difficulties sending and receiving cues.

In the Communication Lab, we train Peer Facilitators to be keenly aware of students’ nonverbal cues and to consider their behaviours critically and within context. We provide them with strategies to encourage positive nonverbal behaviour and ways to decode students’ cues. A facilitator’s use of kinesics greatly impacts the lab environment. Trainees will tend to pay more attention to trainers who use appropriate gestures (Beebe, Mottet, & Roach, 2004). By maintaining eye contact, an open posture, and positive facial expressions, facilitators can increase the level of comfort and participation with their students (Cuny & Wilde, 2004). It is especially important for trainers to maintain good eye contact with

trainees when they ask questions. This lets trainees know that the trainer is giving them careful and personal attention, and that the trainer values and respects the comments being made (Beebe et al., 2004).

2. Haptics—Touch

- When is touch appropriate in the teaching and learning environment?
- Consider culture and gender.

Touch can send messages about power, affection, and intimacy. This can be a difficult form of nonverbal communication to use effectively in the teaching and learning environment. With the level of diversity found within our classrooms, cultural differences are vast. One of our participants shared her experience, explaining that in the Latin American culture the use of touch, is a very common way of communicating. She has learned to explain this to her students from the start of the semester so they can understand her nonverbal behaviour and react appropriately. Another participant added that gender, as well as culture, influences his teaching style. Teaching piano, he is used to taking his students' hands and placing them on the keys. However, he expressed how this touch might be interpreted differently since teaching in Canada, especially with his female students.

In the Communication Lab, haptics can come into play during a few scenarios. When conducting mock interviews, students are expected to shake hands, however, there are cultural differences that can disrupt this process and potentially make students feel uncomfortable. Facilitators are aware of these differences and work to make sure all students feel at ease and respected.

3. Physical appearance—*The body we are born with*

- Do you treat students differently based on physical appearance?
- How does physical appearance impact your students' perception of you as an educator?
- Consider culture, gender, age, height, weight, hair colour, etc.

We can make alterations to our appearance, but in general there is a limited range of ways we can change. Sometimes the age of an educator can affect the level of credibility students' hold. During the conference session, some female participants who had a youthful look lamented not being taken seriously by their students because age had influenced their students' perception of their competency. One participant presented her own experience with how age is perceived in different cultures: Having taught in North America and in China, she discovered that age was more revered in the latter.

Similar issues are encountered by Peer Facilitators in the Communication Lab. For example, the Lab Peer Facilitators are typically the same age as the students they are teaching, which can undermine their authority. Female facilitators have also occasionally expressed discomfort working with a group of all male students. Other times, facilitators worry about appearing unknowledgeable or lacking in credibility when working with older students.

4. Artifacts—*Personal objects that we surround ourselves with*

- Consider what you wear on teaching days and non-teaching days. Is it the same or different? Why or why not?
- Do you label students based on their artifacts, clothing, accessories, or technology?
- What do you take with you to the classroom?

Artifacts are intimately tied to our identities. Far more than our appearance, we have a great range of choice about what artifacts we surround ourselves with and what statements we want to make about ourselves (Corbin & White, 2009).

One session participant noted that, because of her youthful appearance, she wears a ring on her left hand so that students would assume she was married, increasing her credibility. Discussion also surrounded glasses and how the appearance and perception of intelligence glasses provide can lead to a higher level of respect from students. We also touched on what a student wears and how it impacts our perceptions. For instance, a student entering class with earphones on may lead us to believe he or she is not interested in the course.

In the Communication Lab, Peer Facilitators are expected to dress appropriately and maintain a business casual style, while maintaining a comfortable, non-intimidating, peer-to-peer environment. The style of dress can impact a students' comfort level, their respect for the facilitator, and the facilitator's credibility.

5. Environmental factors—*Architectural features of a room, as well as ambience, including smells, sounds, temperature, and lighting*

- Consider how a classroom impacts teaching and learning (desk type, size, lighting, heating, wall colour, etc.)
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the traditional classroom set up?
- Have you rearranged a space to complement your teaching style?

Environmental factors can overlap with artifacts and possibly proxemics as well. In our session discussion, we learned that at some universities you are not able to change your assigned classroom, even if it does not work for your pedagogical style. Changing a room may take years at these institutions, making adapting teaching and learning the only option for educators. Most participants preferred teaching in spaces with modular furniture, so that students could work in groups.

In the Communication Lab, environmental factors are very important to the success of the lessons. Students sit in comfortable chairs, facing each other in a circle that aids in student interaction and allows facilitators to monitor nonverbal behaviours easily. The physical environment can critically influence a group's nature of activity and level of performance, therefore we use living room-style seating in the lab. When you want to establish such conditions, set up a casual arrangement with comfortable seating that removes tables and other barriers from the meeting space (Newton & Ender, 2010).

6. Proxemics—*Communicative use of space*

- How do you position yourself while teaching? What do these positions say about you?
- Have you considered using the teaching space differently, e.g., standing, sitting, or moving around the room?
- Does the layout of your office facilitate consultation with students? Is it inviting?

Proxemics can overlap with environmental factors, with territory fitting into this category. We discussed the habits students fall into in the classroom by sitting in the same place each week. In a sense, the students are marking their territory. Sometimes, changing the seating arrangement can turn a positive climate into a negative one, since students are forced out of their comfort zones. Other times, this technique has worked well to introduce students to others in the class to create a stronger bond. We also challenged session participants to think about the ways they use space in their classrooms and how it impacts the teaching and learning experience.

In the Communication Lab, as previously discussed, students are seated in a circle. Unlike the traditional classroom, our lab space includes comfortable furniture arranged in a circle to encourage discussion and participation. Facilitators and instructors integrate students into the space by giving them the opportunity to stand and use the camera, write on the whiteboard, and present where they feel comfortable within the lab. Sharing the learning space and allowing students to move freely in the lab provides them with comfort and reduces apprehension.

7. Chronemics—*The communicative use of time*

- When do you start/end class?
- Are there different rules for different students when it comes to time, e.g., lateness?
- When do you check and/or respond to email? Do you have a policy in place?

Chronemics, like proxemics, can be used to convey status and power. Discussion surrounding chronemics focused on the frustration felt when a colleague's class runs overtime. Most participants felt they have a good handle on the timing of their classes, but can run into challenges when the timing of a lesson can run short or long. Another issue discussed was the proper response time to student and colleague emails. It can be difficult to strike a balance between professional time and personal time, particularly when we are so tied to our devices. If we respond immediately, an unwanted precedent might be set.

In the Communication Lab, we have 50 minutes from the start to the end of each session. Time management is key when delivering lesson plans, engaging in experiential learning activities and discussion, and ensuring that each student has been given individual time and attention. We remind facilitators that some students may require more time than others to gather their thoughts, some may need time to translate their thoughts into English, and all students need time to be able to explain their ideas to the group.

8. Paralanguage—*Vocalics/vocal qualities of our speech*

- Consider your voice. How does it impact students' learning and/or perception of you as an educator?
- Consider culture. Are accents/dialects challenging?
- What is your perception of a student based on his or her voice?

Paralanguage includes all the voice qualities that come naturally to us, as well as the way we accent and stress what we are saying. We discussed the ways we use our voice to gain attention of the class, including reducing and increasing volume and rate. Some challenges surrounding accents and dialects were discussed; participants were more concerned with students understanding their voice, rather than the other way around. Participants disclosed they have often reflected on their voices and how to better use this tool in the classroom.

In the Communication Lab, we want students to do the talking. One of the major worries facilitators have is that they will not understand a student and that this miscommunication will lead to discomfort or embarrassment of the student. We train facilitators in effective listening and provide techniques to ensure they are attentive and focused on each student.

9. Silence—“ . . . ”

- How do you feel about silence?
- How do you interpret silence in the teaching and learning environment?
- Do you allow for silence? Fill the silence?

Silence can convey comfort as well as discomfort. Silence can be a powerful tool—it can be used intentionally to disconfirm another person, as well as a form of respect to show we are listening or interested in what the other is saying (Corbin & White, 2009).

Silence, like other forms of nonverbal communication, can often be misunderstood. Silence in the classroom may communicate confusion, misunderstanding, or processing time for retaining knowledge or formulating thought. Have you ever thought about how you interpret silence in the classroom? Are the students unwilling to take part even if they know the answer? Do you allow for silence or do you fill it?

In the Communication Lab, facilitators are trained to accept and deal with silence and understand that it is not necessarily a failing on their part. Although sometimes intimidating, silence can be a natural component of the teaching and learning experience. By understanding more about the reasons for the silence, facilitators can use this knowledge to better deliver the lesson plans.

Conclusion

We must become more aware of our own nonverbal communication in order to understand others. What we are wearing, how we sound, stand, or sit, may directly influence students perceptions of our credibility and skills. The results of our session were fascinating; yet not surprising, as nonverbal communication greatly influences all of our teaching and learning environments.

In exploring these nine types of nonverbal communication, we hope that you've increased your awareness of the importance of these messages. Nonverbal cues cannot be dismissed as irrelevant or accidental, their meanings need to be explored and how others might interpret these cues must be considered. This is especially relevant in the teaching and learning environment. We hope you will think about the nonverbal messages you send and receive more critically.

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