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Resource: The Torch or the Firehose
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Basic Communication Skills

Assuming your course is not in perfumes, cooking, or some refined academic version of these, communication in your class will be by ears and eyes—talking and listening, writing and looking. Let's begin with the last of these.

Eye contact

Do you look at your students? Think how hard it is to talk socially with someone who doesn't look at you. Nothing will give your class the "glass wall" feeling faster than to see you talking to the blackboard, the walls, the window, or a point one foot over their heads.

If this is you, pick two or three students who don't sit next to each other and address your remarks primarily to them, then gradually branch out to the others. Or if you bring notes to class, include in them at several points notes to yourself: "Look at the students while doing this!" Look over students' shoulders as they work at their seats—all these help in breaking through that no-look force shield surrounding your students.

Eye contact will also automatically improve as you get to know your students better as individuals, say through office hours or by coming early to class. Even shy people are usually able to look at their friends when they talk to them.

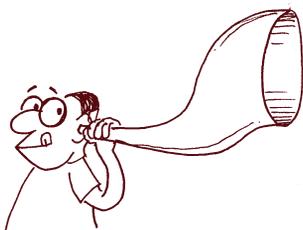
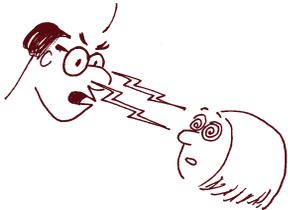
Listening

To communicate, you have to be a good listener. Many people aren't, especially teachers who are a little nervous about their command of the material, or preoccupied with "covering" something, or getting some specific points across. Listening to students presents a particularly troublesome problem, since sometimes they are very poor speakers who don't say what they mean to say.

Remember the discussion in the chapter on Questions: try responding to a question with a question of your own until you feel sure you know and the others know what's being asked. If in doubt, enlist the aid of other students in the interpretation.

- Q** I couldn't get problem 22 on page 263, could you work it?
- A** Did you have trouble getting started, or did you get stuck somewhere in the middle? Or was it that you didn't get the answer in the back of the book?
- Q** Is the gyroscope important?
- A** Important in physics, or the real world, or for the exam next Wednesday?

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Your voice

People don't think much about how they sound as speakers, yet the way you say things sends strong messages to your class and to a great extent determines its overall atmosphere. Put a cassette recorder on the desk and let it run for the class hour. Many teachers are shocked by the playback and don't believe what they hear.

Listen to the *inflection* of your voice. Common problems are:

- Dying fall: voice drops into inaudibility at the end of each sentence. Depressing.
- Rising inflection: every sentence becomes a question? Seems like you hear it everywhere these days? Irritating.
- Monotone; voice on one level, without emphasis. Soporific.

Listen to the *pace* of your voice: a rapid-fire delivery that just can't be followed is all too familiar, and a slow pace has problems also.

Does Prof. R _____ realize it's very hard to take notes after he puts us to sleep?

The TA was very, um, knowledgeable, um, but, um, pedantic, and, um, slow.

Some other common speaking problems:

- Sentences interlarded incessantly with "OK?"; "All right?"; with no pause for response and none expected;
- Voices with an emotional overlay: voices that sigh frequently with apparent boredom, or seem to express underlying anger or irritation (usually the teacher is unaware of any of these feelings).

Again, listen to a tape to hear if any of this is what you do. If you've got a well-modulated, well-paced voice, which expresses a cheerful enthusiasm, congratulations: your class has lucked out. If not, you will be able to change most of the things above once you learn to hear them in your voice by listening to an audio tape. Unfortunately, two are very resistant: monotone speech and too rapid speech. But the latter can be helped if you learn to use the blackboard well.

We've left out foreign accents: see the chapter for teachers from other countries.

Sarcasm and other things to avoid

Words like “obvious” or “trivial” and phrases like “I think you should all be able to see that...” will seem like put-downs to your students and inhibit response; they just are very unsettling if one feels insecure with the material. Think how much courage it takes to respond, “Well it may be obvious, but I still don’t see how you got that...” Don’t put unnecessary roadblocks in their way.

Sarcasm can be put in the same category. A teacher who has excellent rapport with the class can get away with such minor and apparently harmless sarcasm as:

“You’re all geniuses so I know I won’t have to explain this to you,”

but it’s too risky for the average class situation—it just isn’t a joke to students who feel insecure.

The visual side of teaching

This means what you write on the blackboard, or show on Power Point, overheads, or class handouts. Some teachers pay little attention to this, but they are making a mistake. People vary in the way they like to take in information; you need to pay as much attention to the eye-minded as the ear-minded. If you both speak well and write well, it gives you two chances to reach everyone.

The visual side is so important and so neglected we’re going to discuss it in a separate chapter.

