

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**Verbal Communication in the Classroom:
What Christian Educators Can Do to Help Their Students**

By

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Prepared for the
23rd International Faith and Learning Seminar
University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya
November 22-December 4th, 1998.

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I. Introduction:

In communication, it is possible to find a situation where two people say exactly the same thing to a given audience, using exactly the same language, even the same words, but the two will end up passing two different messages. You may also come across a situation where a person has been completely misunderstood by his/her listeners. There are many problems that families encounter that on closer analysis reveal their origins in miscommunication between family members--- and the list could go on. The question is, what is it about communication that brings about difficulties in understanding even amongst people who speak the same language? In communication there are different elements that must work together in harmony to facilitate effective communication. In verbal communication these elements include the sender of the message, the receiver or listener, the message itself, the channels through which the message is sent, and feedback.

What goes on in the classroom is not different because educators are essentially engaged in communication as they teach. For many of them, the many years of experience that they have, may lead them to believe that they are effective communicators. For those who are relatively new in the profession, their lack of experience in the art of communication might manifest itself from time to time even before those that they teach.

Many teaching methods irrespective of discipline have moved over the years from teacher-centered approaches where the teacher is seen as the source of all knowledge to approaches that are more learner-centered. In the Languages for example, what this shift has brought with it is ample opportunities for students to experiment with language as they actively participate in the learning process. Such methods foster fluency in second language learning. The teacher's role has changed from that of controller to facilitator or guide. These are known as

communicative approaches to language teaching, where communication is seen as the focus for language learning. It is for this reason that the author deemed it necessary to explore ways in which the individual student can be assisted so that he/she can gain from the instructions offered in the various fields of education in schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities. The paper looks at ways in which optimum communication can be achieved through teacher-student interaction in the classroom. It is in three parts:

Part one of the paper looks at student expectations as participants in the communication process; part two is focused on self-concept in verbal communication while part three underscores the important role played by Christian faith in Christian education.

II. Student Expectations:

Like in any communicative event, students are expected to have goals which in turn influence their expectations in every course that they undertake to study. In many a classroom, different students will have different expectations. Some students just hope to score good grades at the end of the course, others barely hope to endure the agony of going through three or so months of instruction, yet there is another group who really don't have any expectations, for them, formal learning is seen as part of life, something that one goes through because they happen to be, how they feel about it is not important. Some members of the second group, when asked why they go to school at all, have been heard to say that they go to school to please their parents. Whereas one might interpret such a response to show love for parents, going by their attitude, there's no love manifested there. Such students need to know that they are expected to take their places in society as individuals and that they should not claim to please their parents. This is where the Christian educator is expected to make a difference because Christian education is both transformative and transcendent.

Transformative because we believe that by God's grace, all things are possible, we also believe that Christ died on the cross to save sinners. Transcendent because Christian education goes beyond certificates, diplomas and degrees to concern itself also with character molding for eternity. In this connection, Rasi(1998) makes the following observation, character is what helps us to connect what we learn with what we do, it is the bridge that takes us from knowledge to ethical choices, it is the glue that brings coherence between what we believe and how we behave in private or in public. Thus, the importance of character molding cannot be over emphasized. There are practical examples of parents whose children have excelled academically and have qualified to study in prestigious universities, but have opted for Christian education in some humble Christian institutions just because of this point. This is the reason why, as Christian educators, we must realize and appreciate the responsibility that we have towards the young people entrusted to our care.

III. Self-Concept in communication:

It is a normal human feeling to seek the approval of those that we care for. Small babies are well settled in the arms of their mothers when they can sense approval and content usually communicated via body language, a hug or a smile. When young children involve themselves in attention gaining activities, they are looking for approval or acceptance. In all human endeavors, learning included, one feels good when they know that their efforts are recognized and valued by others. The Bible calls it *love* and the book of John tells us about this love; how Christ loved us that he died for us. In any classroom context, the student with a positive self-concept is better geared towards the learning process than that with a negative self-concept.

A. **What is Self-concept?**

This is the awareness and understanding of who one is as interpreted and influenced by one's thoughts, actions, abilities, values, goals, ideals and by other people. (O'Hair 1997). College students are generally at that age when peer influence is still very strong. What one's peers think is very important and students at this age seem to live for the approval of others. This becomes quite complicated when things don't work out as these students expect them to. They may end up withdrawing and generally just feeling sorry for themselves. Their academic work is affected; they are depressed, and if no help is found, some of them sink so deep that they eventually lose their places in college. The scenario above need not necessarily happen that way. In Genesis 1:27 we are told that God created man in his own image which leads us to believe that every person is very special in God's presence, we also know of God's mercy and forgiveness. Besides being transformative and transcendent, Christian education is also redemptive. The Bible tells us that Christ came to save sinners and this is why Christian education can make a big difference in students' lives. I was once told a story of a student who openly said to a student counselor on campus that he was happier at college because at least people there tried to understand him. Many a time, we are just not aware of the number of young souls who are just waiting to be reached. Holmes (1995) tells us that Christian education should be a liberating experience that enlarges horizons, deepens insight and sharpens the mind. How can we see education as liberating? The word "to liberate" means to release or to set free. Indeed education liberates in the sense that knowledge about things around us enables us to interact with those things, many times, to better ourselves. Modern farming methods are an example in that knowledge of proper and modern methods of farming will yield a better harvest for the farmer.

B. How do we help students with negative self-concepts?

A negative self-concept is not something that can be erased overnight. A negative self-concept develops over a period of time and to change it requires time and patience. Such students need to be handled carefully even in other institutional activities. They need to be shown love and those working with them ought to be people that they can trust and therefore be willing to open up to them. It is sad to relate, but sometimes some educators even in Christian institutions are responsible for some students ending up not feeling good about themselves. Some teachers in their classroom interaction with students use unkind language to demean individuals to the extent that the latter may end up feeling worthless. As Christian educators, our role should entail just the opposite. We should be able to encourage those students that need encouragement through our gentleness and kindness toward them.

C. The Role of a Christian educator:

As Christian educators, there is need for us to make a difference in the lives of the young souls that we come into contact with in our calling. We need to treat them with respect, we need to show them love, we need to build in them a sense of trust, we need to be honest in our dealings with them. Every human being needs to be treated with dignity. In our classrooms we must be aware of the different abilities of our students, there are those that are brilliant and there are those that are not so brilliant but we know that "all were created in God's image" there is no place in the Bible where we are told that God created only brilliant students. There is need to spend more time with students who need our help, be it academic or spiritual. As Christian educators, we should be role models in our dealings with students. A student who does not think much of himself/herself needs encouragement not ridicule. In Matthew 25:34 we are reminded that "what we do unto the least of these" is in reality done unto the Lord. So we find that

showing love and compassion to such individuals honors God because they, like us, are creatures of worth who bear God's image.

D. Language and Communication:

Language is a very powerful weapon and it is crucial in establishing relationships. If used appropriately, it will build relationships while on the other hand, if not used with care, it may break relationships. In verbal communication, as in other forms of communication, participants need to choose their words wisely and carefully so that they don't end up offending or even hurting others by what they say. In the book of James (ch.3) we are told of the power of the tongue, which is described as "fire" capable of great destruction. An old communication adage puts it this way; *meanings are in people, not the words themselves*. In other words, words in isolation are meaningless; it is the way people use them that bring about meaning. As Christian educators therefore, we should let the spirit of God guide us even as we interact with students in our classrooms.

Palmer (1993) talks about "creating space" and tells us that, "to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced". (p.70). To explain what he means, he uses the following illustration.

To sit in a class where the teacher stuffs our minds with information, organizes it with finality, insists on having the answers while utterly being uninterested in our views, and forces us to a grim competition for grades- to sit in such a class is to experience a lack of space for learning. (P.70)

What Palmer describes here is a common feature in our classrooms. The space that he talks about is the freedom that we deny students in our classrooms, freedom to actively

participate in the learning process. Some teachers do not facilitate any forum for discussions in their classrooms maybe because they fear challenge. If we are to lead these young people to defining themselves 'authentically and spontaneously' (p.12), then we must begin the exercise right from our classrooms, allow students to express their opinions even when they differ from ours and encourage healthy discussions. In our interaction, let us foster Christian values of love, trust, honesty, faith and patience.

IV. Faith and the Christian educator:

Faith is the core of Christian life. We live in a fallen world where many things around us do not make sense; the world is riddled with injustice against the weak, suffering, corruption, exploitation, discrimination, war etc. It is becoming more and more difficult to survive let alone live. Where does faith fit into all this? The Bible urges Christians to have faith in God - the creator. For he did not create us without purpose. Rasi (1998) tells us that Faith is both a gift from God and human response to the trustworthiness of God and that to grow in faith, we need the help of the Holy Spirit prompting and guiding us all the way.

Faith is a very personal thing; it is not a subject matter that a teacher can impart in the classroom by itself. Faith needs to be demonstrated, faith needs to be seen in real life. The Bible is full of stories of characters who had faith in God, Moses when he led the children of Israel to the promised land; Noah and the Ark, the story of Abraham and many others. Christian educators need to model Christian faith to their students. Since we live in a world where there are many questions left unanswered, it is important that we model a trustworthy God, a God who will provide answers to these questions.

A. **Can we demonstrate faith?**

Yes, we can demonstrate faith through our lives. Christian faith goes hand in hand with our beliefs, attitudes and values, all culminating in our Worldview, which is God, centered. From this Worldview we know that all knowledge is derived from God such that even as we teach, we must realize that the knowledge we impart to students originates from God. To experience faith is a humbling experience. One comes to realize how dependent we are on the creator. There are Christian values that cannot be separated from faith; these are love, patience, trust and honesty.

1. **Love-** there is different kinds of love, love between parents and their children, love between people who are intimate, but biblical love is that of devotion. The book of John (3:16) tells us how God loved us that he gave his only son to die for our sins. Christian educators should handle their students with care just as God loved us.

2. **Patience-** many of the tribulations that we go through in life require patience. In our teaching activities, there's need to exercise a lot of patience knowing very well that people are all different and unique in the way they perceive things for example. A classic example of patience is given to us in the Bible story of Job who was tried many times but he never failed his God.

3. **Trust-** to have faith, one must trust; however, trust must be earned. Christian educators should endeavor to win the trust of their students. It is only through trust that we can win them over to Christ.

4. **Honesty-** it would be difficult, if not impossible to have faith, or to trust, or to love a person who is dishonest. Honesty is a virtue that all Christian educators should demonstrate in their dealings with students; it brings about trust and consequently even love.

Summary:

The integration of faith and learning is not easy, often; the problem is how to balance the two- faith and learning. In this essay, I have tried to show that integration of faith and learning can be demonstrated through the ways in which we relate to our students and the model we provide of integrity, compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, and encouragement-- the fruit of the Holy Spirit shown through our teaching. Central to this I have tried to show that the attitude with which we approach the job of being a Christian educator should be with the spirit of Colossians (3:17)

"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it

All in the name of the Lord Jesus."

I have also tried to show that it is not enough just to show our care for students, rather, as in the words of Walsh and Middleton (1984) we need to do scholarship in a Christian way, allowing our faith to direct our endeavors. The two components put together should give us a balanced approach to the application of faith and learning in our classrooms.

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