AN A-Z OF CREATIVE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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C is for COMMUNICATION

HOW TO CONNECT WITH YOUR STUDENTS

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Communication is at the root of all we do as teachers and is also a skill that we seek to develop in our students. Without this, we can't build the community of practice we seek in order to foster learning. Developing students' subject knowledge alone is insufficient. Students need to be able to communicate about their subject effectively in a wide a range of contexts, including online. The poignant poem, *On Studying English*, captures the joy of communication, as it talks of *a tongue lying frozen* released to *grasp the words and dance* (Maley and Mukundan, 2007: 66). In this chapter, we will look at creative ways in which we can dance with our students – and support them to dance with each other.

TASK 1

Think of a session you have taught (either in person or from a distance) and list the ways in which you communicated with your students.

REFLECTIONS

It's likely that you have spoken with the students and used some form of text, perhaps with images, perhaps via a technological medium. However, we also communicate through our social practices as we present or create a learning community and expect our students to learn to become members. If we talk about students as if they are passive consumers, there's a danger they will converse with us as if we are suppliers of goods. Similarly, if we position ourselves purely as experts and assessors, we are likely to stem any communication from them which challenges what we say and takes away their agency in learning. Foucault looks in more detail at the way in which discourses of power operate through language (Piro, 2008: 39).

Other things also influence the communication received by students: your body language, the types of words and images you use, the 'register' in which you are speaking, the way you dress or whether you are using specialist discourse can all make a difference, as can dialects, accents, and the way in which you use the space available to you (this is known as *multimodal* communication – see V is for Visuals for more on this). Furthermore, clear messages are sent: if you always let the same few people answer your questions; if all your case study examples are of a particular gender, sexuality, social class, disability status, age or ethnicity, or if you 'other' certain groups of people in your narratives (see N is for No One Eclipsed for more on this).

Is what's received the same as what's delivered?

In our comments above, we referred to our social practices as a form of communication.

> *The nature of pedagogical practice in higher education and its dependence on the identities, experience and interactions of multiple players means that the interrelation between student–staff collaboration and individual participants' development as learners will be complex.*
>
> (Dickerson et al., 2016: 262)

In other parts of the book we look at what students bring to the classroom (virtual or otherwise), and their prior experiences will both colour the way they receive information and add new knowledge to the learning environment. Barriers to communication may be formed because of the differences between the backgrounds of those participating, and it will always be important to establish from the beginning that communication is two-way, partly so that you know what has been received.

How can we improve our communication?

Some suggestions are made to support student contributions to sessions in Q is for Quiet. Many of these focus on reducing the volume of 'teacher talk'. Here we present some further strategies for improving student–teacher communication.

The use of questions

In language teaching, the process of *eliciting* refers to the practice of getting the students to tell you what they know first, rather than you telling them what they 'need' to know (Guo, 1994). The advantages of using elicitation as a teaching approach across a range of subject disciplines are many, one being the way that questions create the opportunity to communicate. Steve Darn (2010), in a blog post on the British Council website, points out that students arrive on courses with existing knowledge that needs to be *activated* in order for new knowledge to be assimilated or accommodated (Piaget, 1952); information is more memorable if one discovers it for oneself, and elicitation is an effective means of diagnosing learners' starting points, leading to more flexible and responsive teaching. Guo contrasts elicitation with *cramming*, comparing the former to lighting a candle, as opposed to the latter, which is *filling a jug* (1994).

Table C1 gives some examples of how information-heavy slides might be turned into questions designed to elicit student knowledge. These examples

are based on the assumption that the session is taking place either face-to-face or via a live video conferencing platform which allows participants to raise hands, send messages or, if they have a microphone, to contribute by speaking.

Table C1   Eliciting student knowledge

Transmission approach	Questioning and communicative approach
Here's what we covered last week.	What did we learn in last week's session? Raise your hand if you can tell me even one thing you can remember/click on the speech bubble in the corner and write down some of the things you can recall.
The definition of health, according to the *BMJ*, is … And according to the WHO is …	How would you define 'health'? Take a couple of minutes, then post your responses. We'll discuss them and then compare them with what the *British Medical Journal* and the World Health Organization have to say.
The principles of Boolean algebra are …	What do you know about Boolean algebra? Call out (or use the chat function to add) some key words 'And' – great! 'Not' – wonderful! Any more? 'Gate'? Anyone not met these terms before? What do these words mean? Can you explain a bit more? What is Boolean algebra used for?

These types of questions can be used in asynchronous online sessions too, such as a recording of a presentation – for example, prior to making the recording, by asking students to create their own definition of 'health' and post it on a discussion forum or message wall, to be referred to in the presentation, or by asking students to pause the recording and write down all the key words that they remember before continuing.

Quizzes are another way of eliciting knowledge from students. Table C2 shows some of the different ways in which quizzes can be designed, depending on the desired learning outcomes.

Questioning can be about far more than recall, however. Phillipson and Wegerif (2016) categorise questions that can be used in a Socratic-style dialogue in order to promote critical thinking, paraphrased here as:

- *clarification questions* ('Can you say that again but in a different way?', 'Can you give an example?');
- *justification questions* ('Why?', 'What evidence do you have?', 'How did you reach that conclusion?');
- *experimental questions* ('Can you find a counter-example?', 'What happens if we double x?', 'How could we find out?');

- *metalevel questions* ('Why did you start from here?', 'What are you assuming when you say … ', 'How did you approach that problem?').

If teaching online, these types of questions play an important role when responding to students' contributions – for example, on a message board or discussion forum. The use of such questions employ the principles of formative assessment – or 'Assessment for Learning' (Black et al., 2004) – by using the students' contributions to shape your questioning, which then prompts them to engage on a more critical level. This is particularly important in a virtual learning environment because when students can see that their responses produce feedback in the form of further questions, this will encourage further engagement. And as you use such questions, you model an enquiry-based approach to learning, which, hopefully, your students will adopt too.

More about online communication

We've mentioned ways in which the strategies above can be used in face-to-face or online situations, but we now turn to look in more depth at communication in a virtual environment. Traditional learning spaces often privilege the use of one type of language, an academic form of English which is not always necessary to create and explore ideas in every (or any?) subject area, and which can act as a barrier to creative learning and teaching. Ryan and Viete (2009: 305) describe the use of *thirdspace learning environments* such as online discussions that *require fundamental shifts in the ways that teaching and learning are mediated, including through dialogic interactions that are shared, respectful, and multivoiced.*

Online communication can take many different forms and, as with all communication, will need protocols to be set up to ensure that it is inclusive. Discussions online can be linear, with one comment following another, or non-linear, where individuals post comments, images and so on, and others comment on selected posts. It's important for you as teacher to have an online presence in these discussions, and for you to refer to them in face-to-face sessions, not only to highlight their existence to those who have not communicated via the medium, but to integrate the content into the planned curriculum, giving the online contributions purpose and authenticity.

Much has been written about the differences between formal online discussion spaces that are teacher-initiated, and informal ones initiated by students (see, for example, O'Connor et al., 2016), with claims that informal social network forums tend to lead to better engagement from students, while university-created virtual learning environments are seen more as a medium for official course material (Maleko et al., 2013). Informal, student-run

Table C2 100 things to consider when creating a quiz

100 things to consider when creating a quiz		
Medium	*Content*	*Purpose*
Paper-based, spoken Q+A, mini whiteboards, technology (for example, online quizzes, polling software/hardware, mobile phone apps)	Factual, open/closed questions, opinion, info gathering, MCQ, images, sounds, problem-solving scenarios, creative stimuli	Diagnostic/formative, summative, self-assessment, assessment as learning, wake-up call, fun, collaborative, peer-learning
How	*Responses*	*Assessing answers*
Open book, closed book, individual, paired, teams, pub quiz style, 'race to the finish', competitive, non-competitive, formal, informal, follow popular TV format, games – for example, matching, ordering, treasure hunt	Hands up, buzzers, electronic – e.g. voting technology, other MCQ software, written, spoken, typed, texted, drawn, acted, targeted questions to individuals, conferring as a team, first to answer, take turns to answer	On the spot, afterwards, automated, panel, give out answers for self-assessment, peer assessment (mark each other's)
Feedback	*Support*	*Extensions*
After each question, after the whole thing, on a handout, electronically, individually	No scaffolding, some scaffolding – e.g. clues, phone a friend, 50/50, team conferring allowed, open book, level of difficulty of questions, type of questions, crib sheet	Bonus questions, some questions open book, some closed, some collaborative, some not, choice of follow-on tasks depending on results, questions that require critical thinking skills, asking the students to write their own questions
Safeguarding and accessibility	*Rewards*	*When*
Confidential responses, anonymous responses, avoid putting vulnerable individuals on the spot, emphasise a low score is informative (as opposed to evidence of failure), signpost students to follow up support, ensure materials are accessible and that they represent diversity	Prizes, no prizes, badging, certificates, medals, tokens, food (check for allergies, diet choices or restrictions, cultural norms – e.g. gelatine in sweets)	Start and/or end of session/module/course, asynchronous or synchronous, flipped or in class

forums can run into difficulties, however, with students posting unprofessional content that is later picked up by employers, or misinformation being communicated and a culture of panic or disbelief created. Therefore, some thought needs to be given to how these 'unofficial' platforms will be used – for example, whether they are open to all students or just 'friends of friends', or whether teaching staff should be a part of them or should actively use them to make announcements or set tasks. One possible solution is to agree with your cohort that the student representative for the group will monitor the chat and seek clarification from the course team when questions about the course or the content arise. This is worth discussing with the group in the early stages of the course so that lines of communication are clear and transparent.

Whether or not to moderate content is also an important question. One teacher we know moderated an online discussion forum which she had set up for a cohort of students, censoring what she felt was inappropriate language. The students responded by abandoning the forum, setting up their own one via an alternative platform and then inviting the staff team to join – as participants but not as administrators.

Assessment feedback

Much has been written about how to give feedback to students – slightly less about how to receive it. Weller (2016: 87) suggests that we capture the potential of feedback as a way of communicating which is two-way and engages students by

> *building on the development of active, discursive and formative approaches within the student-engaged classroom, developing a dialogue-based approach.*

Feedback can compound feelings of failure or resentment . . .

> *This is the lowest grade I've ever had. No other tutor on this course has graded me so low.*
>
> *Why did she get a 2:1 when I got a third?*
>
> *I put so much effort into this, I nearly cried when I saw the feedback.*

These anecdotal examples of student responses to assessment feedback show how emotionally fraught the whole process can be. Two areas of research are key here.

First, Lipnevich and Smith, in a study of college students, found that *Overall, detailed, descriptive feedback was found to be most effective when given alone, unaccompanied by grades or praise* (2009: 319).

Second, work done in neuroscience suggests that our brains are hard-wired to look for negatives, perhaps as a survival technique (Hanson, 2009). The fixation by students on their grades is difficult to overcome without a whole-course redesign. The focus on negatives, however, is somewhat easier to address. Here are some possible strategies.

1. Phrase feedback as 'feedforward' – for example, 'You should have included more explanation' could be rephrased as 'Next time, make sure you include more . . . '.
2. Model oneself as a student. Tracey, a colleague, showed one of her self-critical but high-achieving Level 6 students an example of her own academic work, scribbled all over by her doctoral supervisor. 'I wanted to show that receiving challenging feedback doesn't mean you're a failure – it's just part of the process,' she explained. A similar example could be a teacher sharing with their students feedback from a reviewer for a journal article they have drafted.
3. Rather than exemplars, give students an example of a draft, with feedback and the subsequent changes carried out. This makes the process of drafting, reviewing and revising more transparent.

Other suggestions to include the feedback process are as follows.

*   It's useful to talk about how and when you will give feedback in your inductions and throughout courses so that everyone knows what to expect and when. You can also link this conversation to the development of critical thinking and reflection, as these are skills needed to use it effectively.
*   Explain the use of formative feedback as assessment for or as learning, and also that summative feedback can feed forward to subsequent modules.
*   Do a 'feedback' newsletter following a batch of drafts that focuses on common issues – for example, like referencing skills, which could also include some signposting to further support.
*   Use lots of ways to provide feedback – self and peer feedback, recorded or videoed comments, tutorials. Work out the best way to do this for your students and your workload within your assessment regulations. Biggs and Tang (2011: 65) talk of creating a *Theory Y climate* where errors are publicly debated in a spirit of support and enquiry.

Supporting students to communicate with each other

Modelling good communication with our students is a helpful start, but what other ways can we use to develop this key skill?

Protocols

In Maslow's theory of motivation, he mentions the idea that learners need to feel safe, to feel loved and to belong before they will want to learn properly (Maslow, 1970). One way to establish a safe place in a group is to encourage them to negotiate a way of working together. Some people refer to these as ground rules, but these can quickly be reduced to superficial statements such as 'no mobile phones on in sessions'. We are suggesting a deeper, more inclusive conversation that will be unique to a group and, while most of the resulting statements will include the requirement for confidentiality, they may also suggest more creative ideas based on the experience of one particular group's interaction. Examples may include the request that everyone states their preferred personal pronoun (for example, *ze, they, she, he*) and that others try to use this, that there is 'real listening' or that those who dominate the conversation can be interrupted. In an online environment, examples might involve the proviso that no judgements are made in discussion forums about spelling or grammar, as long as the meaning is clear, or agreements about not sharing images or content beyond the course group.

Giving space to practise communication

It's possible to give lots of opportunities for students to practise communication with each other using different media. For example, if they have done some group work to present to the whole class, ask them to share their findings creatively – e.g. as a poster, a role-play, a short video or a blog (we have even experienced students presenting to their peers in the form of a rap!). Students could also create their own podcasts, blogs and video blogs to share online, supported by a function to comment on each other's contributions (see, for example, Lazzari, 2009).

Student collaboration in teaching and learning design

One way to create a more egalitarian community that enhances communication is to initiate projects that are done in collaboration with students who

are viewed as 'co-producers'. There are different ways in which this can be done, including fairly informally, at the level of individual cohorts. Bovill et al. (2016) describe a geography class of 400 students where they were put into small groups and given tasks to complete via online discussion forums, with set deadlines. Completed work was then submitted to the teacher, who used the results from the students in subsequent taught sessions as a way to introduce topics and frame discussions. By so doing, the students *not only contributed to both lecture content and structure* (co-creating with the teacher) *but also began to collaboratively and subconsciously 'figure out' major ideas and concepts in advance of class* (co-creating with their peers) (Bovill et al., 2016: 202).

We have looked at a few ways in which we can support our communication with our students and some ways in which we can support the development of their communication skills. What we haven't had time to cover is communication with colleagues. With this in mind, we urge you to use this book as a starting point for discussions and, if you have the time, informal peer observations relating to your professional practice as a teacher in higher education. Reflecting on your teaching – with colleagues as well as individually – and supporting your students to reflect on their learning can help to connect students and teachers alike.

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