The "Masked" Classroom

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As a communication scholar, I should have been aware of how much non-verbal immediacy behaviors create community in my classroom. Immediacy is a series of behaviors that shorten perceived psychological distance. Non-verbal immediacy includes actions such as smiles, gestures, eye contact, touches, and proximity. Verbal immediacy includes such strategies as calling students by their names, using humor, and responding to student feedback. Immediacy is a major tool in my toolkit for building classroom rapport and positively influencing learning (Christophel, 1990).

In the pandemic classroom, immediacy strategies were hindered because of social distancing, mandated and strictly-adhered-to mask-wearing, and Zoom-interfaces. I stood in a small area in the front of the classroom that allowed me access to the computer and the whiteboard. Students were seated with six feet of distance between their desks. A handful of students telecommuted. For the first week, I felt as if I couldn't connect, even though I was in the front of the classroom and somewhat clearly projected over video, providing the same content as I had before (updated with whimsical pandemic humor). Students were not participatory, and many students were already skipping early assignments. In all of my classes last year, over 50% of the students didn't complete the basic, introductory assignments for the first week. As I moved into my second week, I understood that students couldn't see my smile or the microexpressions that distinguish between teasing and honest feedback. The mask, even with a microphone, hindered recognition of changes in my pitch and volume. Consequently, students struggled to put into context the encouragement I'd add into my warning that a particular assignment would be challenging, or my emphasis on a particular piece of data, thereby limiting both their comprehension and our connection (Titsworth, 2017). Additionally, I couldn't read their facial expressions through the masks or on their miniaturized representations on the computer, so I lost the ability to know who to call on based on who was reacting nonverbally with interest or confusion. Small group discussions were nearly impossible; students struggled to converse effectively through masks and at a distance (physically or via media). Discussions turned into wildly gesticulated shouting matches that sent students back to their phones in frustration.

My altered strategies, with a mere eight class sessions under my belt, involved a combination of old-school and high-tech interventions. The first set of strategies have helped me better read my students' engagement and comprehension. Old tech for me has included lapboards, the small, 8 ½" x 11" white boards, which I gave out at the beginning of class (with gloves, of course!) and used to solicit feedback. In-the-moment check-in questions allowed me

to see basic comprehension levels that I would historically have gleaned from the furrowed brow or the curled lip. With the lapboards (or electronic polls) I can interject, "quick, what are the three types of evidence?" or "Smiley face if you are with me, frowny face if you need me to repeat!" and get responses that help me decide how to proceed. I realize now that students have historically been distracted, staring at their phones or surfing the web, and nudging them to physically answer (even if at home typing into the chat or texting an answer to my computer) increases their attention.

Newer-tech strategies allowed for more non-verbal cues in messaging. First, online office hours via video allowed me to use many of the immediacy cues beyond touch and closeness that I had employed before. In these exchanges we could hear each other more clearly and see entire faces. Getting students to those meetings was not as challenging as before. Students at my college are accustomed to "popping in" if they see an open door or when they are nearby, but with a virtual office is always nearby. Second, I often followed up my class sessions with video explanations of assignments or answers to questions that were posed via email. These explanations allowed for different non-verbal strategies and allow me to repeat what is sometimes lost in the very spread-out (physically), muffled (mask-wearing), or virtual context. In an era where my students are more practiced watchers than readers, (thank you, TikTok) it was not surprising to me to see my videos watched multiple times, whereas note-sheets I had created went un-opened.

Finally, reducing psychological distance can sometimes happen via rule breaking when it comes to time expectations or in terms of formality. I started using a texting app, where students and I can text each other, but without access to each other's personal phone numbers. This has allowed me to send follow-up notes or ask questions to students that seem less formal than if I had sent them through email. Texting also allows me to replace face-to-face nonverbal immediacy with unique online immediacy strategies such as emoticons, colors, and images (Dixson et al., 2017). One day, I sent a text to my students that said, "wondering why no one is here for office hours…starting my second cup of coffee" with a picture of my coffee cup next to my computer. Within minutes, I had students in my virtual office.

What I realized from this was that student technology use (outside of pandemic accommodations) inhibited their engagement of those messages. As I developed my technical know-how, I focused on tools that would create connection when proximity wasn't possible, but I had not considered that my in-person use of immediacy strategies had been limited for years because students voluntarily put screens between us.

The irony isn't lost on me. I've increased technology usage to be able to connect to the students I see two or three times a week in class. However, the immediacy strategies that I've used historically aren't as effective now, both because of the pandemic, and because my technology-forward (addicted?) students don't absorb them. So, I'm embracing the idea that even if I get to be in the same room as my students, I still have to connect with them online.

References

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