What Are We Communicating to Students When We Write?

DO WE COMMUNICATE more with students in writing than we used to? I think so. In addition to the course syllabus, the usual handouts, and written feedback on papers, projects, and performances, we now share all kinds of electronic messages with students. We exchange emails, post announcements on course management systems, and participate in online discussions. Those who use PowerPoint tend to make rather text-heavy slides. And if you happen to teach online, then virtually all your communication with students occurs via some written format.

First and foremost, all of these written materials communicate messages about the course and its conduct. But beyond this explicit information are other, more subtle messages. They are conveyed not as much by what we say as by how we say it. Without the benefit of tone, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues, written communication creates new challenges for establishing a positive learning environment.

Several parameters guide our written communication with students. We need to be polite, and most of us are. We need to be professional, and most of us don't have a problem with that either. But we also a need to be personable. There's all sorts of evidence that creating personal connections with students has a positive effect on learning experiences, but how much thought do we give to making those connections in writing?

It was an interesting study of syllabi that got me thinking about this. The researchers created two syllabi. The first contained language they equated with teacher-centered approaches—lots of directives and focus on the course content. The second was more learner-centered and described not just on what students would be learning but also how they would be learning. A cohort of students looked at each syllabus and then answered a series of questions about the course and its instructor. Based on the syllabus alone, these students attributed teacher-centered or learner-centered characteristics to the hypothetical professors they had been told authored each syllabus.

It reminded me of an activity I used in my graduate course on college teaching. I assembled a set of syllabi from courses taught by instructors I knew and had observed teach. After removing all the identifying information, I had small groups review a syllabus and share their impressions of the course and instructor. Each time, their descriptions of both were amazingly accurate.

The syllabi study did not consider how impressions about the course and instructor are mediated when the teacher presents and discusses the syllabus in person. But often the syllabus is now a stand-alone introduction to the course and instructor. That's almost always the case in online courses, but even in face-to-face courses the syllabus is often posted on the course website before the class convenes. So, students start to form their impressions before the first class.

I wonder if we are as aware of the "tonal" messages in our written communications as we should be. Often, we have so many assignments to grade that we get tired and the comments can become cryptic. Students, personally vested in their work, respond viscerally to teacher comments, especially those that point out flaws. Yes, they need to grow up and learn from negative feedback, but growing up is a process. How can we make it a constructive experience?

Connecting with students—being personable in our prose—is a matter of style, which means the options are many and the best choices are ones that fit comfortably with our teaching identities. I'd like to encourage us to explore how we're coming across in our writing. Take a look at the last few emails you sent to students. Read some of the comments on those assignments you're about to return. Review your latest contributions to the ongoing online discussion. Does the writing have a voice and sound like it's written by a real person? Is the tone constructive? Does it convey an unwavering belief in the ability of students to learn? If not, what changes can you make?

Reference:

Richmond, A. S., Slattery, J. M., Mitchell, N., Morgan, R. K., and Becknell, J. (2016). Can a learner-centered syllabus change students' perceptions of student-professor rapport and master teacher behaviors? *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 2 (3), 1-10.

Mid-Term Week - Oct. 1-5
Spring Reg. Begins - Oct. 29

Love the One You're With:
Creating a Classroom Community

IT'S THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS. They shuffle in, spot similar life-forms, and slip in with that group. Hipsters sporting wild hair and tats, buttoned-up and serious young scholars, middle-aged moms and dads, maybe a couple of aging hippies. One or two sad souls choose spots isolated from the others; they don't want to identify with them for reasons of insecurity, arrogance, or something else.

Every good teacher knows that learning doesn't happen in isolation. Creating a learning community gives students a sense of security, study pals, and somebody to double-check with about assignments. While once upon a time classrooms were largely homogenous, filled with young white males who shared many of the same real-life experiences, these days most classrooms can, at first glance, seem to be a wild cacophony of humanity, tender and tough, curious and hostile, open-minded and most definitely, absolutely closed.

Here's the question: How do you get them to connect? How do you get them to feel safe enough to express ideas in front of such a varied group, listen to one another's ideas, engage in authentic dialogue, and push their own academic, social, and personal limits in order to grow?

From the moment the class passed the threshold, I feared this was one pot of stew that was never going to mingle flavors. It wasn't just that there were a number of different "types," it was that already, 43 seconds into class, an invisible but palpable distrust was rumbling just below the pitch of human hearing. However, it was not below the pitch of teacher hearing, and it filled me with fear. I had Goths and girlie-girls, straight-shooters and loose cannons, bookworms, and back-row mutterers. I had a guy proudly sporting a spaghetti stained chef's hat, and another proudly displaying a bald and vibrantly tattooed skull, and they were glaring at each other.

I opened my mouth to say, "Class dismissed." Fortunately, my inner administrator reminded me that if I dismissed them before the first class had even started, I would lose my job. My mouth has a mind of its own (often not a good thing) and instead, I said, "Let's dump the desks."

"Huh?" the class sang in unison. A good sign. Unison.

"Shove them out of the way and make two circles facing each other."

"Huh?" they sang again.

"You with the gorgeously tattooed skull, you're in charge. Make them do it!"

He glared. They scrambled. It was done.

The circles formed, the inner circle facing the outer one. They looked almost ready for some spontaneous folk-dancing.

"Inner circle: You've got one minute to pry out as much interesting information from the person you are facing as you possibly can. Skip the boring stuff parents ask their kids' dates. Ask what they're afraid of, if they've ever been lost, or what makes them laugh hysterically."

"Ummm," a girlie-girl trilled, "Like, what are we supposed to be doing?"

"You are speed dating," I said. She perked up immediately, as did several of the older returning students who probably hadn't dated in a while. "When I flick the lights, everyone absolutely stop talking—even if you're in the middle of a word. When I flick them again, outer circle has one minute to ask questions. After your two minutes are up, inner circle steps to the left, outer circle stays put, and do it again. Go!"

"Are you crazy?" my inner administrator said. I didn't bother to answer. The room became a concert hall filled with glorious word-music—murmurs and mutters, giggles and snorts, the rapid gallop of syllables leaping atop one another, all rising to a beautiful crescendo…

I flicked the lights.

Silence.

I flicked again.

Words. Conversations. Eye contact. Here and there, a hand reached out to touch a shoulder, mouths slipped from crescent-moon grins to open laughter.

And thus it went. Round and round the room they probed and questioned and probably overstepped bounds, but nobody complained so I let them be. When everybody had finally met everyone else and it was time to sit down, I saw several students grab their bags and books and slip next to someone from a completely different group. We reviewed policies and talked about my grading system, and they actually listened. But that wasn't the best part. The best part was when the chef-hat guy and the tattooed skull guy left class together, their charmingly ridiculous heads tipped, chuckling over who-knows-what.

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Cynde Gregory, PhD; Love the One Your're With: Creating a Classroom Community; Faculty Focus; August 30, 2018; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/ articles/effective-classroom-management/love-the-one-youre-with-creating-a-classroom-community/] September 26, 2018.