1.5: Communication

To teach is to communicate. One cannot be an excellent educator if they do not possess strong communication skills. According to Silver (2018),

Teaching is all about communication – listening, speaking, reading, presenting and writing. Teachers who hone their communication skills are prepared to instruct, advise and mentor students entrusted in their care. Additionally, teachers must communicate well to effectively collaborate with colleagues and update administrators on student progress. Frequently, parents call, visit or email, so teachers must be adept at answering questions verbally and in writing.

-Freddie Silver

As noted above, teachers are engaged in communication with many different people. While much of a teacher’s day is spent with their students, they must also interact with other teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, parents, and community members. Many first-year teachers are surprised by how many different forms of communication they must engage in each day. Because of this, it is good to have a basic understanding of these different types of communication.

Communication with Students

Communication in a classroom is very different from communication in other aspects of life. Rarely is the teacher engaged in communication with one student while others wait patiently to be heard. Many interactions are happening concurrently. Disruptions happen frequently. It can be very confusing, to say the least. In classroom communication, you will find that it is helpful to understand its various functions. It helps to be aware that classroom communication serves three purposes at once: content, procedures and behavioral control (Wells, 2006).
Classroom events are often so complex that just talking with students can become confusing. It helps to think of the challenge as a problem in communication—or as one expert put it, of “who says what to whom, and with what effect” (Lasswell, 1964). In classrooms, things often do not happen at an even pace or in a logical order, or with just the teacher and one student interacting while others listen or wait patiently. While such moments do occur, events may sometimes instead be more like a kaleidoscope of overlapping interactions, disruptions, and decision—even when activities are generally going well. One student finishes a task while another is still only halfway done. A third student looks like she is reading, but she may really be dreaming. You begin to bring her back on task by speaking to her, only to be interrupted by a fourth student with a question about an assignment. While you answer the fourth student, a fifth walks in with a message from the office requiring a response; so the bored (third) student is overlooked awhile longer. Meanwhile, the first student—the one who finished the current task—now begins telling a joke to a sixth student, just to pass the time. You wonder, “Should I speak now to the bored, quiet reader or to the joke-telling student? Or should I move on with the lesson?” While you are wondering this, a seventh student raises his hand with a question, and so on.

One way to manage situations like these is to understand and become comfortable with the key features of communication that are characteristic of classrooms. One set of features has to do with the functions or purposes of communication, especially the balance among talk related to content, to procedures, and to controlling behavior. Another feature has to do with the nature of nonverbal communication—how it supplements and sometimes even contradicts what is said verbally. A third feature has to do with the unwritten expectations held by students and teachers about how to participate in particular kinds of class activities—what we will later call the structure of participation.

Communication with the Community

Since teachers have public personae that extend beyond the classroom, it is critical teachers are able to communicate effectively to multiple community stakeholders who may be invested in local, statewide, or national educational policies and decision making. There is a multitude of social contexts where teachers will be required to communicate and represent themselves, their students, and their schools. This poses a unique challenge to educators as they navigate these disparate communicative contexts.

As representatives for their schools and students, teachers may be asked opinions on various educational policies. Teachers need to be critically aware that these opinions will not be interpreted as entirely personal opinions, but rather their opinions could be seen as representing an official school or school board policy.

Teachers may also need assistance from outside agencies, media, and others to aid in building robust educational activities for their students. It is important, then, for teachers to consider the intended audience and purposes for their communication and ensure that the teachers’ intentions can be easily discerned and that they fall within the legal confines of their position.

QUICK WRITE

- Think of one context in which teachers would need to communicate to the community.
- Describe the context including interlocutors and other intended audiences
- For what purposes is the communication intended?
- In what ways might the teacher represent the school? Students? The community? Self?
• What considerations, if any, should the teacher think about before any correspondence?

Teachers, as well as students, need to think critically and carefully about the public nature of social media—both in terms of affordances and perils. Teachers should curate their own professional learning networks (PLNs) using social media, i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Blogster, etc… There are many excellent PLNs for pre-service, early career, and veteran teachers that support teachers and celebrate our profession:

• Bad Ass Teachers (http://www.badassteacher.org/)
• Save Our Schools (https://www.facebook.com/OnTheMarchToSaveOurSchools/)
• Edutopia (https://www.edutopia.org/).

Teachers also need to ensure that texts chosen to be made public are thought of critically with respect to the audience, purpose, medium, and possible consequences of the text. The following blog, written by a teacher, (Knoll, 2017) and the article from the NEA (Simpson, 2010), provide a guided discussion on the affordances and possible dangers of public, social media communication:

• We are teachers (https://www.weareteachers.com/dos-donts-social-media-for-teachers/)
• National Education Association (www.nea.org/home/38324.htm)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some rules you will follow as a teacher about how you will communicate using social media?
2. Why should teachers celebrate our profession? What are some appropriate ways we can share and celebrate our teaching?
3. Why is medium just as important as the message? For example, why would a teacher blog be a more apt medium to write about educational policies and pedagogies than a Facebook post?

Communication with Colleagues

The colloquial isolated teacher in his/her classroom defies the collaboration that oftentimes takes place within and across grades levels and departments. Some teams of teachers collaborate to plan, including lesson planning and learning activities. This sharing of ideas makes teaching stronger and fosters a sense of collegiality. Lessons may be improved upon when a number of teachers incorporate their knowledge and expertise. Even new teachers have a voice within this environment and can have meaningful suggestions on what should be included.

Collective autonomy within a school is encouraged and bolstered by the administrative leader. As a result, morale is often more positive when the interaction between teachers is strong and positive. Teacher leadership affects the way the school performs, and the way school policies are carried out. Having an opinion and voicing that opinion helps the faculty come to a consensus.

Secretaries and custodians are colleagues also and should be treated with respect. Secretaries are key to gaining access to school officials while they are a great resource for filling out forms to procure a variety of items. Custodians work hard to keep rooms clean and respond to emergencies that occur on any given day.
Communication with Administration

Advocating for the great ideas a teacher wants to incorporate into lessons is one reason to plan on communicating well with the administration of the school. At times, a teacher needs to request additional money for a crucial program of essential equipment. Presenting a strong, well-planned argument is paramount in making any headway in changing funding or adding activities into the curriculum.

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