
What does a beige top and a load of boxes have to do with teaching?

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According to Darling-Hammond (2006) teaching is a serious business which involves developing policies and practices for 'powerful learning' which meet the needs of learners. So, does it really matter what you wear, where and how you stand; how you speak; what you do with your hands or what the room looks like? You might not think so on first thought but we have discovered that it does make a difference and is important. A small group of staff has been working with an external consultant on just these matters as well as individually developing their own particular needs and having fun with it. This short reflection shares with you a project about 'Peer Review' - but perhaps not as you would know it.

According to Lomas and Nicholls (2005, pg137) "Peer review of teaching is generally seen as a quality enhancement rather than a quality assurance instrument and a powerful means of encouraging the continuing professional development of individual lecturers". In reflecting upon this quote this project attempted to offer a means of enhancing the quality of learning and teaching through an innovative approach to examining aspects of student engagement, verbal and non verbal communication skills. Furthermore, the project set out to focus on aspects of continuing professional practice that were not focused upon examining subject knowledge but rather offered an alternative approach to working with external consultants to examine fresh approaches to peer review.

The project started with a member of staff who was struggling with a group and not enjoying the experience of teaching them without being aware

of what wasn't working but could not work out what wasn't working. An external consultant working on another project helping students with their communication skills agreed to come and observe one of the sessions. Out of this came many points about communicating the message, one of these that has stuck ever since was about the students seeing the lecturer. This first observation took place in a flat teaching space and the member of staff was wearing a beige top which from the back melted into the walls and made it very difficult for the students to actually pick out the lecturer. "How long would they keep their attention on what was being said if they are struggling to pick out the voice?" was one of the questions asked by the external consultant. From this statement, a whole different approach to peer review has been established, developed and evaluated within the Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure at Liverpool John Moores University. We now have developed a new set of possibilities to enhance the way in which we communicate with our students (Hannan 2005) and helping each other to consider different but equally important aspects of learning and development

A systematic review of the literature (Boote 2005) discovered that what makes up how we communicate is split into two main areas namely verbal and non-verbal, which on the surface sounds quite simple. Consequently we began to examine how aware we were of the messages we give out including those unconscious one's and then working to change these was the challenge we faced.

So what did we do?

This type of work is difficult on your own so we buddied up (Wickersham, Espinoza and Davis 2007) with somebody we trusted and were happy to work with - this has proved an important factor to success.

We were initially watched teaching by the external consultant who then gave us feedback about our communication skills and abilities (the areas with examples are shown below) and if possible our buddy was there to help understand our developmental needs. Individually we decided what we wanted to work on for example, slowing our speech rate down, controlling our gestures, wearing different coloured clothing. This first group of willing volunteers has since doubled in size and an evaluation and reflection process has been developed to capture the stories. We have even made a training film of it.

So what have we actually looked at, this was dependant on the individual but on the whole it has included;

- **Speed of speech** - 150 to 180 words a minute works best when teaching, we had examples of people speaking up to 220 words a minute and have worked on different ways of helping people to slow down
- **Tone** - one example of this was using a command tone to ask questions thereby not enabling students to know what to do with the information presented,
- **Volume** - bringing a group back together involved raising the pitch of the voice not the volume and thereby creating little effect with the students.
- **Gestures** - using our gestures to expand on what we are saying rather than distract from the point, pointing with a pen caused a group to move away from the lecturer when the individual was actually using the gesture to make a point.
- **Body language** - what messages do we portray just by the way we use our body. Moving the feet inwards when feeling less sure, clasping hands and fiddling might show less confidence these were both examples from this project.
- **Positioning in the room** - we can stand in different areas to portray different messages, moving closer when telling stories, standing to one side when delivering theory, the other side when asking questions.
- **Environment** - what does the room look like, an example was the room was set up and tidy where the students sat but behind the lecturer was a pile of boxes and TV equipment which made it difficult to pick out the person from the rubbish. Clutter at the front of rooms could be very distracting from those facing forward.
- **Clothing** - the colour of what you wear really does matter. Wearing a top that is the same colour as the room makes it more difficult to see the person and therefore takes more attention on that rather than what is going on. Thinking about the space you are teaching and therefore what colours our need to wear sorts this out easily, or even more simple avoid pale colours.

Concluding thoughts:

This approach has been received positively on the whole, one of the respondents reports that *"It's given me a different dimension"* and this has been linked by another to an increase in confidence in engaging students in different ways. Comments were made about being more aware of both verbal and non-verbal behaviour and more importantly being able to do something about it *"making sure you know what sort of verbal or visual cues you want to give out at a particular point"* states one of the team. Overall the project seemed to have made a difference to the staff involved *"my awareness is just so much more heightened as a result of the project so enthusiasm was raised and I think my skill level has been raised"*. The work is on-going, with one individual stating that they are *"trying to work out how I can within lectures plan a combination of where I stand with the subject matter, how I use my voice and how I also engage the students... and the interaction between the students and between students and myself"* The participants continue to think about their communication, make changes within their teaching and talk to their buddy and we hope that this approach will be spread as more and more people get involved.

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