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THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN TEACHING MODERN STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the importance of interpersonal communication in lecturer-student relationships, in an era in which higher education has shifted from an elitist model to mass education. Through training and professional development, lecturers can improve their abilities in five key communication dimensions: lesson organization, message clarity, interaction with students, generating interest, and creating value. The combination of these dimensions, along with a learner-centred teaching approach and the adaptation of teaching practices to the unique characteristics of students from Generation Y and Z, are the key to quality teaching in higher education.

Keywords: higher education, interpersonal communication, learner-centred teaching, generation Y and generation, quality of teaching

Introduction

In higher education, there is constant interaction between lecturers and students, thus making the quality of teaching and the methods of content delivery an important issue for both parties. Contemporary research in the field emphasizes that the quality of the lecturer's interpersonal communication directly affects the students' academic motivation (Hamdan & Attika, 2024).

To communicate effectively, lecturers need to be aware of the characteristics of Generation Y and Generation Z and adopt a learner-centred teaching approach. This approach requires the use of diverse teaching methods, and flexible learning spaces that encourage active, collaborative learning and dialogue, rather than just frontal teaching in traditional lecture halls (Valtonen, Leppänen, Hyypiä, Kokko Manninen, Vartiainen, & Hirsto, 2021).

The main problem is that many lecturers lack pedagogical training and are unaware of their communication patterns. The feedback they receive is mainly based on student surveys (Hativa, 2005, 2010), but research studies show that information alone is not sufficient to improve the quality of teaching. Therefore, higher education institutions need to develop training and professional development programmes for their lecturers through teaching advancement centres. A focus on interpersonal communication skills is necessary in order that institutions can adapt themselves to the needs of today's students and cope with the increasing competition (Lehrer Knafo, 2019).

Higher Education in the Contemporary World

Higher education institutions have a long history of teaching, research and service to society through the applying knowledge and training role-holders in society and the economy. Higher education enjoys academic freedom, insulating it from societal pressures for the benefit of society. The purpose of academic freedom is to enable high-quality teaching and research without fear of sanctions from society (Altbach, 2015; De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Higher education was originally intended for the elite and was not intended to be universally accessible. However, cultural, social and economic processes around the world led in the second half of the 20th century to the expansion of access to higher education, from education for the elite to education for the masses. The concept that emerged regarded access to knowledge and learning as a universal right, one of the central rights of the global community. This concept contributed to the view of education as a means of social mobility, coping with poverty, and reduction of inequality in society (Coley & Baker, 2013). This process is called the “monetization of higher education” (Trow, 1973). The expression of this process is a significant increase in the number of students studying in higher education throughout the Western world. In Europe in the 1950s, 3%-5% of the relevant age group (25-64) had a higher education, yet today this number has jumped to more than 50% in many countries. This is the case in the United States, Canada, and Israel (Finnie & Usher, 2007; De Wit & Altbach 2021; Lindberg, 2007).

These processes have expanded in light of globalization, a central reality of the 21st century that has greatly influenced higher education worldwide. Globalization is defined as a global process—shaped by the global economy—in which ideas, information, people, capital, and products move rapidly from

place to place, unhindered by distance or borders. The world is thus perceived as a “global village” with an impact on the economic, political, cultural, and social systems in most countries of the world (Van Der Wende, 2003; Zhu, 2015).

Higher education is involved in global economic changes. It is essential for the production, exchange, and application of knowledge in the global market, as a country’s ability to rapidly adopt, disseminate, and maximize the technologies relies on education. In parallel, higher education is influenced by the development of technology and computing, innovative means of communication, education without borders, and globalization. Technology is reshaping pedagogy and teaching. The abundance of information influences the patterns of communication between lecturer and student (Lemoine, Jenkins, & Richardson, 2017; Manning, 2017).

From a global perspective, it can be seen that globalization processes have caused higher education systems to become more uniform and “international” in their characteristics. Through the uniformity in the various institutions afforded by the Bologna Process, students can study in several institutions and countries on their way to gaining a degree. Some universities offer programmes designed for students from abroad (Lewin, 2010); other universities have campuses in countries where the culture may be different from that of the parent university. Academic staff exchanges also exist between countries (Tange, 2010). Technological developments are changing the nature of teaching in higher education: there are massive open online courses (MOOCs) taught through distance learning and Moodle, a learning management system that accompanies the studies in the various courses. Finally, globalization expands the potential student pool for academic institutions, at the same time increasing the competition.

The higher education market has become more competitive since the COVID-19 pandemic, in light of the development of models that expanded distance learning (Cunha, Chuchu, & Maziriri, 2020). During the coronavirus crisis, “e-learning” became the accepted way of teaching in higher education. Today, there are target populations of students for whom access to higher education is only possible through digital formats independent of time and space (Kerres, 2020). Teaching involves a combination of frontal, face-to-face teaching and virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous learning, although each form of learning has its advantages and disadvantages. However, Nortvig, Petersen, and Balle (2018) found that the lecturer’s presence and interpersonal communication with the students have a great impact. In order to remain

competitive, the administrations of higher education institutions are required to establish a policy that fosters the quality of interpersonal communication between lecturers and students, since teaching and learning are complex processes that are influenced beyond the frontal or online learning format (Hamdan & Attika, 2024).

Characteristics of Quality Teaching

In light of the increasing number of students and the diversity of populations of learners in higher education, as well as the international uniformity and increasing competition in these systems, we are witnessing significant changes in pedagogical aspects and learning environments (Sogunro, 2015). The quality of teaching is seen as a crucial element of the students' educational experience, thus influencing their choice of academic institution, motivation, and dropout rates (Valtonen et al., 2021).

Although there is no general agreement among researchers on the nature of quality teaching (Wood & Su, 2017), two main approaches can be distinguished: traditional lecturer-centred teaching, in which the lecturer transmits knowledge and the students are passive; and constructivist learner-centred teaching, based on Vygotsky's theory (1978). The second approach is considered the concept of quality teaching in the 21st century, with the students being responsible for constructing their own knowledge and the lecturer acting as a guide who supports the learning process (Blumberg, 2016; Stover, Heilmann, & Hubbard, 2018).

Teaching is the lecturer's personal activity that includes personal and environmental factors and requires dealing with unexpected situations in real time. Quality teaching requires social, educational, and technological skills from the lecturer. (Skelton, 2009; Wood & Su, 2017). Research studies have found that the relationship between the lecturer, the student and the material being taught is a central component of the quality of teaching; aspects such as communication, clarity of messages, organization of the lecture, and the students' personal connection to the subject are critical (Hamdan & Attika, 2024).

In learner-focused teaching, the student is at the centre and their needs must be taken into account. This approach requires the lecturer to use diverse teaching practices (lectures, learning groups, cooperative and dialogic learning), and effective communication that leads to more positive learning

outcomes. The interpersonal aspect is regarded by both the lecturers and students as the key to effective teaching (Hativa, 2005; Valtonen et al., 2021).

Adapting Teaching in Higher Education to the Needs of Contemporary Students

To meet students' needs and implement "learner-centred teaching", lecturers must be familiar with the characteristics of the target population in higher education. This involves taking into consideration their being adult learners and the generation to which they belong—Generation Y and Generation Z (Shatto & Erwin, 2017; Sogunro, 2015).

Generation Y includes individuals born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s. They were the first wave of the digital generation born into the world of technology. Members of this generation are highly skilled in digital knowledge, feel comfortable using a keyboard, and prefer it to writing in a notebook. They prefer digital books over printed ones and are accustomed to being in constant contact with family and friends anytime, anywhere (Saxena & Mishra, 2021; Shatto & Erwin, 2017). Their circle of friends is virtual, and they cultivate their relationships mainly on social networks. Their pace of life is fast, they adapt to changes, and they live for the day—they do not like to plan long-term. They are driven by goals and success: work is very important to them, while family remains in the background. From their perspective, success, career and money are top priorities, as they have learned that this is what can advance them in today's consumer society (Carter, 2018; Chicioreanu & Amza, 2018; Tari, 2010).

Generation Z includes people born from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s. This generation grew up in the digital age and uses technology in all aspects of life, thus being the first generation to have spent their childhoods with smartphones. It is also the first generation to be truly global: from the consumption of music, fashion, food, entertainment and culture to the creation of connections, globalization characterizes the culture and social lives of Generation Z, who simultaneously experience more uncertainty, volatility, complexity and ambiguity than previous generations. It is the most materialistic, tech-savvy, and globally connected generation, when these traits are expressed in their impatience and need for challenges and excitement (Alruthaya, Nguyen, & Lokuge, 2021; Carter, 2018; Chicioreanu & Amza, 2018).

While these groups share many similarities, each has its own unique characteristics that create challenges during classes in higher education (Shatto & Erwin, 2017).

According to the professional literature, Generation Y and Generation Z learners are characterized by their ability to respond quickly, their desire for constant and immediate interaction, and self-perception as technological experts. They tend to learn independently, feel comfortable in visual digital environments, and have the ability to multitask (Pérez-Escoba, Castro-Zubizarreta, & Fandos-Lgado, 2016; Schwiger & Ladwig, 2018).

However, the common assumption that these new learners have high technological literacy is erroneous: daily use of the Internet and smart devices does not impart higher-order thinking skills without appropriate instruction. In fact, the new learners are characterized by low information literacy, rapid retrieval of information at the expense of its evaluation, and little understanding of information needs (Boyd, 2014; Johnson, Adams-Becker, Estrada, Freeman, Kampylis, Vuorikari, & Punie, 2014; Pérez-Escoba et al., 2016).

McCrindle (2009) and Valtonen et al. (2021) propose four principles for teaching in the digital age that are also suitable for higher education: (1) the principle of reality–practical learning that allows for immediate application of knowledge, (2) the principle of relevance–adjustment of content to students' areas of interest, (3) the principle of responsiveness–positive communication that includes interest, guidance, caring, and inspiration, and (4) the principle of relationships with the environment–an open learning environment that allows for student engagement, collaborative and dialogic learning, project-based learning (PBL), and more.

Lecturers should be aware of the factors that motivate mature students. These include: quality of teaching, quality of curriculum, relevance and pragmatism, interactive lessons and effective management, immediate assessment and feedback, learner autonomy, supportive teaching and learning environment, and academic advising (Alruthaya, Nguyen, & Lokuge, 2021; Hamdan, & Attika, 2024).

Teaching plays a central role in higher education, and it needs to be adapted to the 21st century with a student-centred approach that addresses student characteristics. The role of the lecturer today is not to transmit knowledge but to be a guide, a mediator and an instructor; therefore interpersonal communication is required for optimal teaching (Hamdan, & Attika, 2024).

Interpersonal Communication in the Learning Process

Communication between the lecturer and the students is a central pillar of effective teaching (Graham, 1997; Gruber, Reppel, & Voss, 2010; Jankowiak, 2015). The transition to innovative teaching methods emphasizes the importance of interpersonal interaction, both between lecturer and students, and among the students themselves. Today, when learning proceeds in flexible and informal spaces, and dialogue takes place in small groups instead of traditional lecture halls, the importance of the message conveyed increases (Valtonen et al., 2021). The lecturer must convey clear and focused messages tailored to the students' needs, and which enable them to perform the required tasks optimally. In addition, the lecturer is required to serve as a role model for the students and demonstrate skill in the management of the complex dynamics of interpersonal interactions in the learning audience (Saxena & Mishra, 2021).

Many of the obstacles to effective attention during the lecture stem from lecturers and their way of conveying the message. These include a long and awkward message (noise), ambiguity and internal contradictions, a deficient logical sequence, a monotonous and unimaginative presentation of the message, and ignoring the nature of the target audience (Hativa, 2014). Obstacles for attention lie also in the "noises" that derive from the students. However, a good lecturer who takes initiative to communicate better during the lesson can help in the process of attention through the organization of the lessons according to the students' needs, ensuring clarity of the messages, and displaying interest in the target audience, the students (Zamir, 2006).

In the student-centred approach, an effective lecture depends largely on the lecturer's ability to communicate successfully with the audience. Therefore, it is crucial that the lecturer encourages two-way communication: from the lecturer to the students, and the students back to the lecturer. In many cases, communication from the students to the lecturer will not occur because the context is not sufficiently clear. Is it legitimate to ask to stop the lecturer during the lecture? In addition, some students fear admitting that they do not understand the material, causing them to refrain from asking the lecturer, which ultimately harms their learning. To create two-way communication that will contribute to the lecturer's effectiveness, the lecturer is required to know the students' characteristics, to understand their fears and concerns, and to identify the factors that motivate them. It is vital that the lecturer be attentive to what occurs in the 'here and now' in the lecture, responds to the students' facial expressions, stops the lecture, and examines whether it

is necessary to provide clarifications or answer questions (Zarraconandia, Aedo, Díaz, & Montero, 2013).

Hagenauer, Muehlbacher, and Ivanova (2023) and Gore, Smith, Bowe, Ellis, Lloyd and Lubans (2015) maintain that the responsibility for the students' motivation is that of the academic faculty. They propose three elements of interpersonal communication to improve the teaching under the control of the lecturer and causing an increase in the students' motivation. The first element is value: the extent to which the lecturer communicates the value of the course to the students, the extent to which the students are aware of their ability to make use of the course content in the short-term beyond the learning in the class. In addition, it refers to the extent to which lecturers "infects" the students with their enthusiasm during the lesson. In other words, it is the value of the lesson in the lecturer's eyes (whether the lecturer teaches so that the lesson has value in his eyes teaches to return to research? The second element is the students' self-confidence. Sometimes students fear revealing their lack of confidence in understanding the material. This fear may pertain to fellow students or lecturers. To boost the students' self-confidence, the lecturer must provide feedback during the lessons. The third element is the classroom atmosphere. The goal is for there to be an atmosphere of excitement during the lecture and desire to advance in the material. It is necessary to avoid situations in which the students sit bored and avoid eye contact with the lecturer and fellow classmates. The lecturer is required during the lecture to pay attention to noises that influence the atmosphere in the class and to change the atmosphere as necessary. The lecturer's improving one or more of the elements—value, student self-confidence, and class atmosphere—will increase the students' motivation to learn and consequently enhance their learning (Hamdan & Attika, 2024; Zamir, 2006, 2014).

Five dimensions relating to interpersonal communication have been defined as important by both students and lecturers (Chen, Chen, & Chen, 2014; Hagenauer et al., 2023; Hativa, 2005).

1. The organization of the lesson. Students know what has been learned until now, what is being learned now, and what will be learned in the next stage. In addition, the time spent on the lesson is utilized effectively for learning. The way the lecturer organizes the lessons helps the students remember and understand the material, thus giving them confidence.

2. Clarity of the messages. The lecturer presents clear and understandable explanations that enable students to understand what is learned and to

perform the tasks and assignments required in the lesson and between the lessons.

3. Creating interest. The lesson is interesting and strengthens attention and concentration. The lecturer successfully maintains student concentration and involvement in learning during the lesson through a variety of techniques and behaviours, such as diversifying the teaching methods, changing the tone of speech, moving around the room, and giving examples.

4. Contact with the target audience. The lecturer responds to what is happening in the 'here and now' to create a positive and pleasant atmosphere. The lecturer is attentive to the students' verbal and nonverbal (body language) messages and holds positive and beneficial interactions with students, such as encouraging them to ask questions and responding adequately to their questions.

5. Creating value. The students understand the value of the course and its contribution to their knowledge. They are aware of their ability to implement the learned knowledge outside of the class and seek to advance in the material. It is necessary to avoid a situation in which the students sit bored and avoid eye contact with the lecturer and with the fellow classmates. The lecturer is required during the lecture to pay attention to noises that influence the atmosphere in the class and to change the atmosphere as necessary. The lecturer's improvement in one or more of the elements of value, student self-confidence, and class atmosphere, will increase the students' motivation and consequently enhance their learning.

The following figure shows the five dimensions of interpersonal communication in teaching in higher education which were found to be meaningful both for the lecturers and for the students.

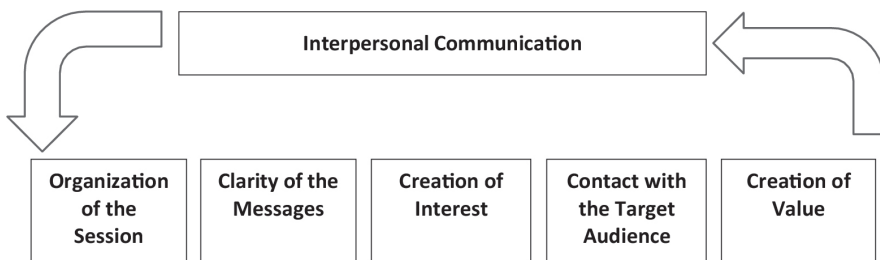


Figure Number 1: Five Dimensions for Efficiency in Interpersonal Communication in Higher Education

Source: Own elaboration based on literature review (Chen et al., 2014; Gore et al., 2015; Hativa, 2005).

The recognition of the importance of interpersonal communication in teaching in higher education poses a significant challenge to lecturers (Lehrer Knafo, 2019). Lecturers are required to navigate between two central roles—research and teaching—when their formal training focuses mainly on the research field. Most lecturers are appointed to their positions on the basis of research excellence, without the requirement for organized pedagogical training (Pleschová, Simon, Quinlan, Murphy, & Roxa, 2012; Rosado Pinto, 2008).

As a result of this gap, many lecturers adopt teaching methods based on their experiences as students, thus leading to outdated approaches that focus on delivering content rather than developing students' understanding and needs (Pleschová et al., 2012; Sogunro, 2015). Another problem is the lecturers' lack of awareness of their communication patterns, as indicated by Hamdan and Attika (2024). This is because feedback on teaching, in almost all higher education institutions in the world, is carried out through Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET).

These surveys provide the lecturers with statistical data on student evaluations and present their relative position compared to their colleagues in the profession. Sometimes, the lecturers also receive anonymous verbal comments from students. However, as noted by Hativa (2015), who has conducted extensive research in the field, the main problem with such surveys is that lecturers have difficulty identifying the specific weaknesses in their teaching methods themselves. Furthermore, even when lecturers are aware of their weaknesses, they often lack the tools and knowledge required to self-improve their teaching.

This challenge is exacerbated when lecturers face unexpected events during class, a phenomenon that is more common with teaching techniques based on dialogue and working in groups that influence classroom dynamics. However, research shows that lecturers' interpersonal communication skills can be improved, hence the importance of professional development and appropriate support (Lehrer-Knafo, 2019).

The centres for the advancement of learning and teaching in academic institutions play a decisive role in this context in that they offer pedagogical support to lecturers, assistance in the improvement of the teaching, and dealing with innovative approaches through individual or group consultation, and integration into professional learning communities (Wright, Lohe, & Little, 2018).

In the era of generations Y and Z in academia, it is essential that lecturers adapt their teaching methodologies to the unique communication

characteristics of these students. This is particularly important when training future specialists in education, psychology, and social support, fields where interpersonal communication constitutes the very core of professional work. Lecturers who successfully communicate with their students serve as role models for intergenerational communication principles that will form the foundation for their students' future professional success (Dudar, 2024).

Conclusions

In the present era, the importance of interpersonal communication in higher education is more central than ever. The shift from an elitist model to an open and accessible model, along with the effects of globalization, led to diversity in the student population. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the combination of online and frontal learning and created a hybrid reality that requires adjusted communication skills. In addition, students from Generation Y and Generation Z come with different expectations and needs, which require a shift towards a student-centred pedagogy based on open communication and effective dialogue.

In the fields of education, psychology and social support, the quality of interpersonal communication determines the difference between success and failure in professional intervention. Therefore, higher education is required not only to teach communication as theoretical content, but also to demonstrate it in practice through interactions between the lecturer and students. This is especially critical because in such professions communication is not only a tool for transmitting knowledge but the main tool through which all professional knowledge is practically applied with service recipients.

The main challenge lies in the fact that most lecturers in academia arrive without formal pedagogical training and are unaware of their interpersonal communication patterns. In the absence of structured feedback regarding these skills, many experience difficulty identifying their weaknesses and how these impact on the learning process. This situation affects not only the quality of the teaching but also the students' learning experience, the effectiveness of the learning process as a whole, thereby creating a significant gap between the students' communication needs and the lecturers' abilities to fulfil them.

Therefore, centres for the promotion of teaching quality in academic institutions are facing a pressing need for professional development among teaching staff, which focuses on improving interpersonal communication

skills. Workshops, personal programs and structured feedback mechanisms have become indispensable tools in dealing with this challenge. Higher education policymakers must understand that improving interpersonal communication is not only a means of improving the quality of the teaching, but also a basic condition for ensuring the relevance of higher education in the 21st century and for preparing students for the complex, global world of work that awaits them.

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