Self-Confidence and Communication

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Five Ways to Foster Self-Confidence

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One of the most important attributes you bring with you to each and every class meeting is your level of self-confidence. Self-confidence provides the foundation for mastery of at least two of the five Critical Success Factors of good teaching: leadership and communication. The self-confident instructor radiates trust and respect, making him or her a more effective leader and communicator.

But how can you grow self-confidence? This is a great question, and I recently discovered five practical answers described in an audio program recorded by Brian Tracy, a noted international business consultant. His recorded talk, “The Science of Self-Confidence,” contains a treasure trove of ideas on the subject. Information on this program is available at http://www.briantracy.com/.

Self-talk

The first confidence-building technique calls for implementing life-enhancing self-talk. Tracy’s experiences in business have convinced him that higher-performance men and woman use a different style of self-talk than do medium- or low-performance individuals.

Monitor your self-talk for a day. What’s your style? Does it create positive or negative emotions? Are your messages encouraging, positive, and decisive, or critical and fault-finding?

The way you talk to yourself can significantly affect the outcome of what you do everyday and how you feel about your performance. Successful individuals have problems too; the difference is in their response. The most successful people train their minds to see a personal benefit being derived from every situation. If your self-talk needs improvement, implement Rule One, stress the optimistic view.

What does this mean? Add firm, directive thought affirmations such as, “I can do it!” and “I like myself!” Other things you might say to yourself are:

- “I feel healthy and energetic!”
- “I love teaching!”
- “I feel great; I can do this project!”
- “Okay, that’s it—I’m taking control!”
- “I feel healthy and energetic!”

The idea is to create affirmations that are positive, personal, and stated in the present tense.

Written affirmations

Even though you are busy and time-pressured, take time to write out goals and affirmations and read them several times per day to convince yourself that your goal is achievable. Such written affirmations will sink into your mind, be believed, and help you take appropriate action.

Emotional visualization

If you agree that the spoken or written word is a powerful stimulant to improved self-confidence, then consider how much more effective is the use of multisensory imagination. When you visualize success, it fires the emotions and often speeds the pace of goal achievement.

When visualizing or meditating, see yourself as being perfectly successful during any teaching performance. Purposely construct a detailed mind picture of the last time you accomplished similar task.

Practice in your imagination seeing, hearing, and feeling a perfect performance or a great accomplishment. Tracy argues that all improvements in performance come after alterations in mental pictures and internal messages.

External messages

Feed your mind and soul with inspiring messages from books, magazines, tapes, CDs, and positive people and events. You should do everything possible to avoid negative people and media, as they will sabotage your attitudes and lower your spirits.

Courage to act

Nothing is ever a 100-percent sure thing, but risk action anyway; action breeds confidence. Act in a positive, forceful manner with a firm belief that you can achieve. Move fast; be a doer, not a complainer. Doing builds self-confidence; and doers continuously improve teaching and learning as they move forward. Therefore, work to boost your self-confidence, and you’ll teach for success every time!

TFS Action Steps

Choose at least one of the five confidence boosters, and employ it today. Assess the results; try the next strategy. Determine which of these works best for you.
Job Bank Strategy Pays Big Dividends

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Many community college disciplines fall under the auspices of career or vocational programs. This implies that the student will have the ability to secure gainful employment in his or her chosen field after graduation.

Indeed, such programs often prepare students well by teaching them the rudiments of job hunting, where to look for employment, how to write a resume and a cover letter, and even how to dress and conduct oneself during a job interview. Although such strategies are extremely effective (I routinely teach such skills in my own classes!), I have created what I like to call a student-generated job bank that will fine-tune the job-search process and personalize it to a much greater degree. The job-bank assignment has two distinct phases and can only be employed (pun intended!) after the instructor has covered the aforementioned basics of job acquisition.

Create a job-listing notebook

The first step in creating an effective bank simply consists of asking the student to keep a notebook or a folder that includes one new job listing per week that he or she would be qualified to fill after graduation. The job opportunity can be secured from a listing in the newspaper, on the Internet, on a business or agency Web site, or even on a job bulletin board. The actual ad or a copy of each ad should appear in the student’s job bank. The students are asked to engage in this process for about 8 to 12 weeks.

By the end of the semester, the student could potentially have a dozen places that might be interested in hiring him or her. After each student has completed compiling his or her job bank, the students are asked to share their findings with the entire class. Thus, everyone ultimately benefits from everybody else’s work.

Role-play interviews

The second part of the assignment is accomplished by placing students in dyads and having them role-play typical questions that will invariably show up in most job interviews. One student plays the interviewer, the other the person who is attempting to get the job. Students are urged to plan what they will say prior to the role-play.

The questions used in role play may include ones like, “What can you tell me about yourself?” (If you haven’t been engaged in the job-interviewing process for some time, you might be surprised at the inappropriate things students and even applicants for high-level educational positions in academic institutions say when asked this simple question—emphasize that the job-seeking student should focus on her qualifications in the field rather than the fact that her mother liked her sister best or perhaps that she was a room monitor in the fourth grade!)

Another common question is, “What are your strengths and weaknesses or limitations?” Then there is the client-, patient-, or customer-from-hell question. This question might take the form of: “What would you do if a customer came into your store and began screaming that the prices were too high?” (Students need to be reminded that although no perfect answer to this question exists, the interviewer is interested in seeing whether the interviewee can stay calm and react in a rational manner in a high-pressure situation.)

This may be followed by the program-improvement question. An example might be: “Assume that we hire you as our new volunteer coordinator. We currently have 20 volunteers at our agency, and we would like to double that number by the end of the year. How would you accomplish this?”

Lastly, the “more information” question may be asked: “What questions do you have about our business/agency/hospital/etc.?”. (We recommend that the student prepares at least one question to show his or her interest in the organization.)

Feel free to add an additional question that is particular to the specific field you teach. After the role-play the students can praise the student who is playing the interviewee for his or her performance and offer any suggestions for improvement.
Trigger Words: Watch Your Language
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Regardless of how experienced we are as teachers, it never hurts to be reminded of the way seemingly small or trivial things can greatly impact our classroom presence and professionalism. In fact, college faculty veterans who are tenured and comfortable in front of students sometimes need occasional reminders in order to maintain that energetic, professional image that enhances a group’s dynamics and manageability.

Effective communication, I believe, is the most important skill that educators need to monitor consistently and hone to best serve their students. Whether or not you embrace the concept of “students as customers” (a red-flag phrase to some—read on), you no doubt agree that everyone taking your classes deserves quality instruction, and a fair return on their investment.

Today’s review lesson, if you will, is on how our words influence our environment—in this case, the classroom. Trigger words, in particular, often have an effect on our students that we might not be aware of, but that we need to understand.

According to Michael Bugeja, author and associate director of Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University, trigger words are so called “because they trigger a reaction inside us and, consequently, cause us to lose perspective when we most need it.”

For example, if teachers mention the names of high-profile public figures in a topical example (e.g., Jesus, Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush, Michael Jackson, Jennifer Aniston, or even a class member’s name), listeners will shift momentarily to their perception of that person and either accept or reject the message based on their attendant preconceptions. The same goes for places (such as their home college, Iraq, Ground Zero, Disney World, or even Wal-Mart) and times (spring break, finals week, or September 11th).

Bugeja says of positive triggers, “When someone pushes a button, we respond favorably to a stranger or source, thinking we know them or share values, simply because they have used a certain word.”

Triggers can be also be negative, serving to turn listeners off; some communication scholars call these negative triggers red-flag words.

Several years ago I was reminded of this by a female student who told me I should not use the phrase “you guys” even casually in class, because there were women also present. Now, I could have just dismissed this criticism as being too picky or trivial and labeled her overly sensitive. Instead, I thanked her for pointing this out to me, and as I begin my sixteenth year in full-time college teaching, I find myself passing her words along to my speech students in units ranging from organizational communication to public speaking.

I agree with one of the Brumfield Rules of Manual Usability, which states, “When a word or phrase offends or gives pause, pluck it out.” In fact, I go one step further. If I even anticipate that any part of my language might offend just one of my listeners, I will find a different term to convey the message.

According to an article from Technical Writer magazine (Integrated Publishing and Communication Services, Tokyo), one’s culture helps to determine which words or phrases are red flags, or “those that invite a negative reaction from the reader.” Sexist, racist, and religiously biased phrases are definite no-nos, but even poor grammar or inappropriate colloquialisms can cause astute students to wonder why college-level educators either don’t know or choose not to use correct language. Any time listeners are moved to wonder this, by the way, the speaker’s credibility is under scrutiny, no matter what the message may be.

The bottom line? Like, it’s a no-brainer, dude. To get the most bang for your buck, me and you need to watch our freakin’ language, dog, when we are doing what we do best—sharing valuable insights and helpful information with college students. Instead of thinking we need to fit in by speaking the language of our young college students, perhaps we need to accept that we continue to be educational examples—yes, even role models.

Let us take pride in the fact that when officials (or even notable celebrities) criticize the sloppy language of Americans today, at least we do not contribute to that decline in our classrooms.

Resource Notes:
• The article from Technical Writer can be found at http://www.ftf-tokyo.com www.ftf-tokyo.com.
**Communication Spoken Here—americancomm.org**

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Do you have a comprehensive communication plan incorporated into your classroom scheme? In this time of technological revitalization and wireless computing, you should. By now, you most likely communicate with your students and coworkers using a combination of print, computer, and telecommunications media on a daily basis.

Take a good look at what level of style and skills you present to others. Whether you are hunting for a more effective and fresher approach to e-mail format, or you suddenly transformed into an online journalist, the American Communication Association (ACA) Web site (www.americancomm.org) is just the place to look for solutions and new ideas.

The American Communication Association’s Web site is full of discoveries. Have you ever really thought about what makes computer copy so different from printed copy? This Web site will handily answer that query. With online reading rates estimated to be nearly one-third slower than reading from print, it is more important than ever to advance your abilities by increasing your communication information base; a stay at the ACA Web site will do the trick.

**Web Site Organization**

At first glimpse, the ACA home page may seem quite frugal to you; you might not even want to bookmark it! There are no engaging video links, no entertaining graphics or sounds, no brightly colored indexing or multiple toolbar functions, just the basics.

This is an organizational Web site whose board of directors is composed of university professors and administrators from across the United States, serving North and South America and the Caribbean. Their mission is the advancement of human communication in all forms via the scholarly exchange of ideas, research, and theories.

Guided effortlessly by the left-hand list of categories, you will find the choices of learning more about the ACA, including links to their sponsored conventions and accreditation service, a membership link, a current academic personals section, as well as search and contact functions.

On the right side of the home page, you will see a link to the organization’s American Communication Journal and hookups to newly released articles and news bites in the area of communication studies. The most valuable and useful link for educators is the expansive ACA Studies Center, clearly a diamond in the rough.

Informational links are presented linearly, and are all current and working. Goals for each page are simple, straightforward, and effective. Each link is professional and quite strong in content, in contrast to the understated simplicity of the site presentation. For great user convenience, each page is hot-linked to its Web manager just after the purpose statement.

**Classroom Resources**

The ACA Communication Studies Center is the most important place to visit while exploring this Web site. Their stated goal is to “provide a centralized index of Web resources on communication and practice.” It consists of a large compilation of academic and professional communication resources, simply categorized under a dozen subtitles: Business Communication, Communication Education Technologies, Gender and Communication, Film Studies, Language and Linguistics, Research Methods, Rhetorics of Science and Technology, Statistical and Data Archives, Social Scientific Communication Research, Independent Media Centers, and Mass Media and Culture.

It is easy to see how college teachers from all disciplines will find great usefulness in a visit to this site. Clearly the most universally useful sub-site, containing resources useful to all, is the Communication Education Technologies link. Here you will be able to refer your students directly to several immediately lucrative sites for their journey through the latest in computer-mediated communication; there are six pages of retrievable resources. For example, a trip to the WWW Style Guide, sponsored and maintained by the University of Delaware (www.udel.edu/ideacenter/) it offers a student-centered “IdeaCenter” for Web-developing topics and advice.

Similarly, instructors using the Using Technology in Education link by Algonquin College (algonquin.on.ca/edtech/index.html) will find a Web guide for teachers and topical consideration of the latest perspectives in computer-mediated educational techniques.
How to Transform Chats into Learning
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As much as you encourage discussion and open communication in your classrooms, there are certain times you must have your students’ undivided attention to accomplish needed instruction. One way to compromise between their urge to chatter and your need to focus on educational objectives is by having a Community Circle discussion at the beginning of each class session.

Finding the Bond
A Community Circle is just as its name suggests—a group of students connected by a common bond. This bond or community may be curriculum- or profession-related. For example, a biology class is full of students who share an interest in learning about science. A teacher-preparation class is comprised of aspiring educators. Finding the potential bond between the students is the basis for the Community Circle and will direct each session’s discussion.

Structure
Organize a Community Circle by dividing the class into groups of five to seven students; having too many in a group will distract from their focused discussion. To encourage the feeling of classroom cohesion, assign students to groups, as opposed to letting them choose their own Community Circle participants. This will allow for more honest, open, and direct discussion. Students can be assigned to groups in a variety of ways: they can be heterogeneously grouped by age, race, and gender; students with similar interests can be placed together; random arrangement is another possibility.

Once the Community Circles are formed, visually display the students’ groups in a central location in the classroom.

Groups can be given catchy color and subject titles, such as the Turquoise Trapezoids or Purple Psychologists. Letting the students choose their own group name is another option. List the students’ names or put a picture of them under their group title.

What Is Discussed?
Themes for each Community Circle should be related to the course’s curriculum or the focus of the day’s session. For example, in an introductory psychology course, students may be learning about various experimental methods used for research. Community Circle focus questions for that class session may be, “If you could perform any kind of experiment, what would it be? Who would be your subjects? What would your hypothesis be?”

A literature course studying various types of writing may have questions such as, “Which writer would you enjoy meeting? What would you discuss with them about their writing? If they could teach you something about their writing style, what would you like to learn?”

Provide the students with thought-provoking questions that allow for a creative range of responses. This way, both purposes of the Community Circle will be served: to permit students to talk among one another and focus the discussion on the session objective.

To promote punctuality, read the questions aloud and instruct students to form their Community Circle groups immediately when class begins.

Allow ten to fifteen minutes for Community Circles to meet, enough time for each member of the group to speak. While groups are meeting, this will allow you time to take attendance or perform other classroom management duties.

Finally, briefly observe each group to monitor their progress and join in their discussion if warranted. When communication seems to diminish or the time limit is reached, have the students return to their seats and begin instruction on the day’s learning objectives.

TSF Action Step
Introduce a Community Circle discussion group into your class to discuss a specific theme conjoined with your learning objective for the day.
How to Communicate Accountability

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Because I want to make sure my writing students know what is expected of them, I’ve developed a writing assignment that I call the Accountability Memo. Designed as a learning task for my Technical Writing class, I have students write about the importance and benefits of the following behaviors:

- Regular attendance.
- On-time arrival to class.
- Participation in class discussions and asking questions of the instructor.
- Maintaining a courteous attitude.
- Choosing not to plagiarize.
- Doing the best work possible at all times.

Discussing these items briefly requires students to put in writing what they already know about being in school and what it requires.

In addition to giving me a brief snapshot of their writing abilities, the memo gives student a low-stress practice exercise at using memo format and topic headings.

Why Visit Again

Computer-mediated communication has already become commonplace in our everyday lives, but do you really get the nuances between printed copy and computer-mediated writing? Educators are now experiencing the infancy of wireless technology applications on college campuses worldwide.

Over the next few years, communication will continue evolving at lightning speed. This Web site will link you to many valuable and reliable informational pages that will help you fine-tune all of your communication skills.

The ACA and the Internet function together to keep you in sync with the second phase of the Information Age.

It’s critical to use this site’s resources over and over again to improve your focus, especially on integrative technology communication skills, keeping you a progressive educator at your very best. You will be so glad you did. The indexing on the ACA home page is so brilliantly simple and succinct that you will be stunned by what is inside each linked page. And there is no question that you must go further into this site.

Communication Spoken Here—americancomm.org

continued from page 5

If your class is engaged in active, ongoing research methods, then your students will find everything they need at the Research Methods hyperlink, where they can begin with the American Psychological Association (APA) Web site for style and citation, and then move on to online links to freeware and statistical software.

As their research progresses, an off-site drop-in to the Princeton Survey Research Center will redirect them to a list of links from twelve American university survey research study centers, all with a wide variety of helpful data-collecting and processing themes. There are a total of forty-seven educational links under this subtitle, all of which are operational, timely, and regularly updated.

The Mass Media and Culture subtitle opens a vast collection of hundreds of independent media links from over fifty nations around the globe. Its purpose is to offer links to hundreds of “grassroots, non-corporate news coverage” outlets. Such Web sites are fantastic sources of unfiltered audio, video, and text-based news, eyewitness accounts, analysis and contact information for independent journalists and producers on any topic you can imagine.

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Become Part of the Solution…
Constructivism and Your Classroom

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While certainly not a new idea, constructivism is a theory about the nature of knowledge and learning that is receiving increased attention as a meaningful and effective instructional design. Currently being applied to teaching at all levels and learning and across content boundaries, constructivists like Piaget and others believe that students best learn when given the opportunity to construct knowledge from within themselves in interaction with their environment.

This approach emphasizes active learning, and the focus is on student thinking. New knowledge is built upon the foundation of previous experiences. Students learn by encountering ideas, acting on them, manipulating them, and then discussing their own thinking.

How Is Constructivism Different?

Those of us who were asked as learners to memorize mathematical or scientific procedures without meaning, or who were expected to parrot data as unrelated bits of fact and information, are probably products of the more traditional transmission model of learning and teaching. Constructivism suggests a distinct contrast when compared to the traditional model that so frequently characterizes classrooms and instruction today. Not at all student-centered, the traditional model’s focus is on teacher- and textbook-driven classrooms wherein students are expected to passively absorb information from the instructor, who is viewed as the giver of knowledge. Neither student autonomy nor independent thinking is nurtured, which is reason enough to shift away from this transmission model and toward a more student-centered approach to learning.

What Are the Implications?

When translating constructivist theory into practical formats for classroom practice, it is important to note that constructivism tells us much more about learning than teaching. While acknowledging that constructivism is not a teaching method, it has implications for what we do in the classroom.

First and foremost, your role is to structure appropriate experiences so that your learners can actively construct knowledge and discover, explore, and connect concepts, rather than merely memorizing and replicating procedures. If you adopt constructivism, you will also:

- Ask thoughtful, open-ended questions to stimulate independent thinking.
- Value communication in the classroom so that students become aware of multiple perspectives on the same problem or probing question.
- Shift your instructional focus away from a pure “teacher telling” approach so that students have an opportunity to explore and inquire without first knowing the instructor’s perspective.
- Blend Socratic questioning during instruction with a variety of strategies, such as field experiences, discovery learning, modeling, or cooperative learning.
- Maintain your commitment to a focus on conceptual understanding rather than mere rote memorization of procedures and facts.
- Inquire about students’ prior knowledge and experience so that this might serve as the foundation for developing learning opportunities.

When these teacher behaviors reflect your philosophy about how students learn, no longer will knowledge be merely transmitted from instructor to learner. Instead, students will be actively engaged in thoughtful inquiry into the why and how of the concepts examined, whether they are studying history, mathematics, or science.

Finally, it is perhaps the potential for nurturing life-long, independent learners and thinkers that offers the most compelling argument for considering constructivism as the theory of learning that frames the practice in your classroom today.

TFS Action Step

Structure appropriate experiences so that your learners can actively construct knowledge and discover, explore, and connect concepts, rather than merely memorizing and replicating procedures.