



Connect with Students: Verbal Communication

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello. My name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey and I want to welcome you to the Beyond the Podium podcast series. This podcast series is on teaching and learning and our guests offer their best tips, strategies and innovations and some great stories along the way about teaching. In this episode, we get to chat with Jennifer Smith, costume designer-turned-teacher extraordinaire. She's had a wealth of varied and colorful experiences in her career, from building costumes for Prince to helping faculty with teaching practices. But today, she's going to talk to us about communication because across careers, years, and experiences, good communication is the single thread that can make an experience go from mediocre to spectacular.

Jennifer Smith

My coming to the University of Florida was an interesting journey. I originally worked in theater at the Guthrie Theater, which is one of the largest regional theaters in the country. And I went from there to working for Prince, the rock musician.

And I decided that I wanted to do a little more to give back to the people who taught me, so the theatrical community. So I went to graduate school at UNC Chapel Hill for theater production and came right to UF, had a great interview with the costume designer here. We hit it off very well. And to this day, we are best of friends.

And here I am at UF. I was only going to stay here for a couple of years, but I really liked the people I was working with. It's a really great place to be.

Alexandra

One of the lovely things about Jennifer is her openness. She's always happy to talk about her experiences, share her know-how with anyone and everyone.

Jennifer Smith

Oh, I just love sharing everything that I know with anybody who will care to listen. That ranges from my experience in theatrical costume work to what I've learned about teaching online to what I've learned about teaching in general from other faculty here at the University of Florida.

Alexandra

Jennifer considers communication to be the key to any endeavor, including teaching and learning. So how does communication or good communication fit into teaching? Well, Jennifer has developed a three Cs of good communication philosophy.

Jennifer Smith

I think that communication is actually the key to everything, not just teaching. So I think that there are what I call the three Cs of communication. So the first one is you have to have interesting content. You have to have a topic that people want to hear about or that is important for them to hear about.

The second would be communication. So that's what we're talking about today, the actual transmitting of information, ideas, concepts, enthusiasm about that content. And then I think that third C is actually the connection. Because if you don't actually connect with your audience, then neither the content nor the communication piece is going to work. So you really have to actually have an emotional connection with your audience.

Alexandra

Good communication, information sharing, can be done in a number of ways. Just like most aspects of teaching, though, it requires a little thought and a little planning.

Jennifer Smith

So there are a lot of different ways that we do communicate. We can communicate through text, with our reading or writing in our courses. We can use videos. We can actually use podcast recordings like this one.

So there are a lot of different channels. I think that's what the actual communication field calls it. They call it different channels that you can communicate through. And of course as we are teachers, lecture is the time-honored way of communicating. So spending some time on thinking

about how one lectures and thinking about doing it in an effective and interesting way, I think, is worthwhile.

Alexandra

Jennifer points out that lecture is much like a performance. But most performers in entertainment fields spend loads of time preparing, where teachers don't often get that luxury. So where and how would an instructor even begin? It starts in part with body language.

Jennifer Smith

What's interesting is theatrical artists, performers, spend years training to be effective communicators on the stage. They take acting classes. They take speech classes.

They have speech coaches. They do physicality training. So they spend years on all of this. And your basic lecturer is expected to just walk into a classroom and be brilliant.

[LAUGHING]

And don't get me wrong. Many of them are. We have some fabulous lecturers here at the University of Florida. But not everybody is really great at it from the start.

But it is something that can be practiced and learned. So I think where all good speaking starts is really with your posture, so having a good, solid sense of your instrument. That's your body.

One of the biggest tips, I think, is to get out from behind that podium. Oh, my gosh. Right at the start, you may be putting a barrier between yourself and your students by standing behind the podium.

Now, I understand that in some courses, you have to manage the computer and you've got to do stuff and show things. And of course, it's not going to work for everyone. But if you can get out from behind that podium, right there, that helps you to reach out to your students much more effectively.

Alexandra

Wow. That's a lot of things to remember. And all of these things contribute to positive communication. They can function as the backbone and foundation to a brilliant lecture. Jennifer does suggest that we can start simply with facial expressions, considering our posture, and thinking about our body language.

Jennifer Smith

Oh, my goodness. Your students are watching your face to get a sense of what you're talking about. So the face is one of our primary means of communication. And really, the biggest thing you can do to effectively communicate with your students is make them receptive to your message by smiling.

And it seems so simple, but it's hard to do that. You're tired. You're thinking about all this stuff. You are just not thinking about smiling.

And now again, I say this might not be for everyone. Because what if you have just a topic that does not lend itself to smiling? But if you do have a topic where you can be friendly with your students, a nice, big old smile is a really great way to start class.

And don't forget eye contact. So just let your eyes rest on each student for just a moment or two. It doesn't have to be a long time. And in fact, you'll start making people feel uncomfortable if your eye contact is too long.

A couple of other things about your posture is you want to stand with your weight evenly on both feet and try to relax. I know it sounds-- here I'm telling you to do all this stuff and remember so many things. But if you can just relax and roll your shoulders back and just breathe, take a moment to have a nice, deep breath from your diaphragm, that can really help you be very calm and centered in your presentation.

Alexandra

Jennifer has some great ideas on how you can prepare to speak publicly and use your diaphragm in doing so.

Jennifer Smith

I mentioned breathing as an important piece. In the theater, we have a couple of exercises that you do to make sure that you're coming from your diaphragm. So your diaphragm feels like it's around your stomach area. And you want to make sure you're breathing from that area as opposed to high up in your chest.

And one of the activities I remember-- now, I must say that I am not a performer nor do I play one on television. I've gained these tips through years of theatrical work. But one of these exercises is just by saying "ha" and making sure that you're pushing it from your belly. So you go ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.

Now, people are going to look at you funny if you walk around doing this activity. So you might just practice this a little bit on your drive in to work or while you're sitting in your office before

class. But you're just trying to work that diaphragm and get the voice coming up from your belly as opposed to your upper chest, which will make it more possible for you to speak for an hour without getting tired and help you to keep that energy and enthusiasm going in your voice.

Alexandra

Diction is just as important as breathing and projecting. And without proper diction, words can easily be blended or misunderstood and the meaning and intent of what you're saying is lost.

Jennifer Smith

Diction is my Achilles heel. My diction is just terrible. And I blame it from my Midwest upbringing. But without the good diction, that is, attacking the beginnings and the endings of your words clearly, particularly making sure that you enunciate the consonants, what happens is your voice falls off between words. And particularly if you're pronouncing words that may be jargon or technical terms for your discipline, the students may not quite catch that. And then they're left wondering, well, what was it that they said? I don't know. I didn't quite catch that. And if you don't actually have the word written on your PowerPoint slide, you've just completely lost them.

So practicing your enunciation with tongue twisters, for example-- that's one of my favorite things. I sit upon the slitted sheet, upon the slitted sheet, I sit, which amuses sixth graders when you mess that one up. Also, I'll recite poetry. One of my favorite poems-- actually my staff will hear me recite "Jabberwocky" from Lewis Carroll. They'll hear me recite that on occasion. Or if you don't like poetry, the periodic table of the elements is a good one.

You can also sing along with your favorite pop star, although I will tell you many pop songs don't have very good diction. "I want 'chu' baby," you might hear in a pop song. But some of them have very good diction. Joni Mitchell has very good diction. Queen actually has very good diction. So pick whatever you like and practice.

Theatrical performers, as I mentioned at the beginning, spend years practicing. They spend at least a half hour before every performance warming up. And we think an instructor can just walk into the classroom and be brilliant without that is-- it's just not reasonable. So a little bit of practice with those tongue twisters can really help your students to understand what you're saying.

My favorite source for listening to good voice is National Public Radio. So if you listen to the national hosts, oh, my goodness, they have some beautiful voices, clear diction. And you never hear them speak in a monotone. So they're always going up and down, up and down with their voice. So I will listen to NPR on the radio and I will repeat what they say after they say it if I've particularly heard an interesting phrase or something like that.

Another important thing to think about is you have to be excited about your topic. If you're not excited about it, the students aren't going to be excited about it. And if it's a course you have to teach and you've been told you have to teach it and you're not excited about it, well, I'm afraid you need to find a way to get excited about it. So find the interesting thing and the unique story or the particular fact that's going to really make it interesting to your students. And by being excited about it yourself, that'll come through in your voice.

Alexandra

But communication is a two-way street and good communication requires engagement. So Jennifer proposes some easy ideas to captivate your audience and get them engaged.

Jennifer Smith

What happens is students feel that you're not paying attention to them. So that's when you lose them. They go off and look at their phones because they're not fully connecting with you.

And one other thing that you want to do is walk around your classroom if you can, move to the back of the room. Those people in the back think that you don't see them. And you want to show them that no, you do see them and you think they're important.

So another thing that you can do is before class, walk around and talk with them a little bit. So get to all of your students. As you go through the semester, just make it a point to chat with each student a little bit before the class begins. Now of course, if you aren't able to get to the classroom or there's another class before that, you might chat with them very briefly after class if you have that opportunity. But the most important thing is to make them understand that you see them and you care about them because that is what you are trying to show.

Alexandra

On that same note, caring and respecting for students means, in part, knowing that they are super smart and capable. But giving too much information in a single lecture may take away from the really important ideas and concepts that you have to share.

Jennifer Smith

I think people feel like they have to get as much information sent out to the students as they possibly can. And that may or may not be effective. What you want to do is think about what is it that you are trying to communicate? What is it that you want the students to really get out of the

session? Are they actually going to remember every word that you said over the entire semester, after they've graduated?

So you've got to focus on the key takeaways. What are the really important things? And once you take a little bit of the stress of having to get through a lot of content and maybe focus on reinforcing concepts or emphasizing concepts or even when you introduce new material, you know, what are those key takeaways.

Alexandra

So now that we may have shared too much information and you may be feeling like, good heavens, you'll never remember all of this, we want to share some good ideas on how to relax.

Jennifer Smith

So just first of all, don't forget to breathe. Make sure you remember to do that.

[LAUGHING]

And also, don't be too hard on yourself. We're suggesting a bunch of tips in this podcast. You're not going to remember to do all of them. Be kind to yourself. It's OK if not every lecture is perfect or every phrase is perfect or every word is perfect.

But you want to be conversational with your students. You want to project, so you want that support from your diaphragm, yet you want to be friendly and conversational. And if you think of it more as a conversation with your students, that can help you to slow down a little bit.

Also, you can walk around a little bit. It's fine to walk as you're talking. Ken Bain, who wrote *What the Best College Teachers Do*, suggests that you shouldn't start walking in the middle of a point.

So you start walking as you introduce a point. And then if you're walking, then don't stop until you've finished your point. So that's what he suggests. And he also reiterates what I mentioned earlier, which is to engage every student. Try to at least make eye contact with each of your students as you go through your presentation.

And he also suggests to switch your pace up every 10 or 12 minutes. I think research has shown that your attention span drops off after about 20 minutes. And I think some would argue that it's much shorter than that now. So if you vary your pace, vary the speed at which you're speaking, you can wake those students up a little bit.

You can also integrate activities for your students throughout your session. So have them write down a key point and stop talking for a minute while they do that. I think a mistake that a lot of

people make is that they expect the students to write as furiously as possible, taking all those notes. But if they do that, if they're writing so furiously, they're not really paying attention to what you're saying. So is there a way you can take a break from you talking and let them really incorporate that concept into their thinking and then start talking again?

Also, you want to make sure that you're not reading your PowerPoint slides. I know a lot of folks want to have very complete slides so that that helps students with their note-taking. But what that does is that splits the student's focus between you talking and your slide. And they can't do both.

And then we're asking them to write. So we're doing three things at once. And that really doesn't work very well.

Alexandra

So now that you have all these ideas on how to implement good communication practices, what can you do to make sure that your message is being received clearly?

Jennifer Smith

I think the biggest challenge is to determine if the students have actually received your message. I don't have a magic bullet for that. I think some folks may find that the classroom response tools might be helpful. So you can survey them to determine whether or not they actually understood what you were saying or took away from what you were saying what you intended.

There are other strategies, such as the cloudiest point paper. So at the end of class, take a moment and ask them to write down what was the cloudiest point for them? What did they not understand? If you don't want to take class time to do that, that could be a post on the discussion forum. You could use an online discussion forum for that.

Another thing you could do is have a Canvas survey. You could put one right in Canvas. You could use Qualtrics for that, as well. So what was it that you didn't understand in the session?

Another thing that you could do is you could do the think-pair-share. So you could have them think momentarily about what it is you said, write down what they thought or what they didn't understand, and then turn to a neighbor and discuss whatever it was. And then you can call on them to have them identify things that were not clear to them.

Students are typically reluctant to make themselves look like they don't know anything or to look maybe foolish by saying, oh, I didn't understand that. So you want to help them feel comfortable about that. And one of the ways to do that is instead of saying, did everybody understand that, which nobody is going to raise your hand for that, you might ask, is there something that I can explain better or is there something that I can do to help you better understand this topic or can anyone tell back to me what they thought I was saying?

Alexandra

Jennifer has shared a multitude of great tips and strategies. But at the end of the day, the most important takeaway is really quite simple.

Jennifer Smith

So I've mentioned a whole lot of things that-- I know people aren't going to remember everything. But really, the most important thing is to smile. Be human. Be as friendly as you can.

Try not to be grumpy when you walk into that classroom. Even though you may have had a bad day so far, you're going to really have some fun with your students. And that is worth a smile.

Alexandra

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. We're so happy you joined us. And we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.