

# Genderly Speaking, Ellen Hudgins Hendrix, Georgia Southern University

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**Abstract** This article examines communication styles that can be adapted to the classroom, providing information on gender communication patterns and identifying several communication rituals to help teachers understand themselves and their students better. The article concludes with some suggestions for improving communication in the classroom.

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Which sex makes the most effective communicator? The fact is that men and women are both effective communicators in different situations. What men and women really need to do is to be more aware of their communication styles so that they can be effective communicators, no matter what the situation. Nowhere is this truer than in the classroom. Sometimes teachers face situations where they are not quite sure how to deal with students, and the consequences are often conflict and misunderstanding. How often have teachers given assignments, clearly and concisely, only to have students turn in papers that fail to live up to their expectations? The reason may be that teachers have not communicated their expectations clearly. The power that teachers have to enable students to participate and to bestow rewards and punishment is their primary source of influence in motivating students. If teachers are to be effective in communicating with students, they must be willing to take a few risks in order to enhance their own communication skills and to be adaptable to different situations and students. Tannen (1994), professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, agrees that there is a need to account for gender differences in communication styles: "... both styles make sense and are equally valid in themselves, though the difference in style may cause trouble in interaction" (p. 23). Therefore, if teachers' communication styles differ from their students' styles, they are not communicating as effectively as they could. Because it would be impossible to expect all students to adapt to one style of communication, it seems most logical that teachers examine their own communication styles in an effort to become flexible.

First, classroom teachers must look at students' needs and their ability to meet these needs. Male

students are more likely to seek information through reading or asking a friend rather than "in a public situation, where asking will reveal their lack of knowledge" (Tannen, 1994, p. 26). However, these students are more likely to approach a teacher in private during office hours. Second, teachers cannot judge a student's understanding based on assumed confidence because "different people will talk differently, not because of the absolute level of their confidence or lack of it, but because of their habitual ways of speaking . . . . Women are more likely to down play their certainty, men more likely to down play their doubts" (Tannen, 1994, pp. 35-36). So to be effective, classroom teachers need to create an atmosphere where all students feel comfortable asking questions.

Teachers also have to remember that much communication takes place without the benefit of words. Teachers must be aware of the messages their students are sending--as well as the messages they are sending their students--through nonverbal communication. Tone of voice and facial expressions say just as much as words do. For example, if teachers are too relaxed, students may not take them as seriously as they should, especially a female teacher talking to a male student. By the same token, a male teacher may diminish the effect of his praise if he offers it too formally. Teachers should improve their conversational styles, playing on their strengths and minimizing their weaknesses.

Teachers must get beyond rituals if they are to communicate effectively with all students. As Tannen states, "Conversation is a ritual. We say things that seem the thing to say, without thinking of the literal meaning of our words . . . when a ritual is not recognized, the words spoken are taken literally" (1994, p. 43). For example, many women include apologies as a ritual part of their conversations. Apologizing is their way of restoring balance to a conversation or simply expressing understanding. "Rituals work fine when both parties share assumptions about their use" (Tannen, 1994, p. 47), but when the ritual is not shared, communication becomes ineffective. A male student may not take a teacher's comments or criticism seriously when it is prefaced by an apology. The end result may be a teacher's frustration because a student "didn't do what [I] told him to do" and a poor grade on the assignment, resulting in a student's frustration: "[I] don't understand what you want." Likewise, a female student may feel rejected by straight or direct criticism because most students, male and female, are not used to being challenged in the classroom. Male students may very well rise to the challenge, but many female students will not, and, as a result, communication has been defeated before it has ever really begun.

Giving praise is also a conversational ritual. Women tend to expect praise; otherwise, they assume the adage, "If you can't say something nice about something, don't say anything at all." Men, on the other hand, take a lack of praise (feedback) as assumed confidence. But praise can defeat communication. Female teachers are usually more willing to give praise and to preface constructive criticism with praise; however, some students will focus on the preface (the praise) and disregard the criticism. Then, when assignments are submitted, teachers realize that communication has failed. Female students, on the other hand, may feel frustrated because a male teacher "never says anything good about my work." Teachers should be willing to praise their students. However, teachers should not praise when there are problems that need to be addressed. They should address the problems first to focus attention on the criticism; then they should give praise when praise is

merited through improvement to let students know they are making progress.

Another communication ritual is indirectness, ". . . a fundamental element in human communication. It is also one . . . that can cause confusion and misunderstanding when [teachers] have different habits with regard to using it" (Tannen, 1994, p. 79). Teachers are indirect in the sense that they mean more than they put into words, often assuming that their students know what they mean rather than actually saying what they mean. For example, a teacher may tell a student that a body paragraph needs development, assuming the student will develop through specific example. A student may add a couple of unspecific sentences to "develop" the essay, thinking he or she has done what the teacher said to do. Both the teacher and the student end up disappointed. Classroom teachers need to learn to express themselves more directly, to say what they mean and make their expectations clear. When teachers' expectations are clear, students are more likely to live up to these expectations.

Knowing patterns of communication, the first step to effective communication, enables teachers to understand themselves and their students better. The key to effective communication is to be flexible and understanding. In doing so, the frustration of poor communication will be reduced while satisfaction of doing well will increase--for both teachers and students. Teachers will become effective communicators, enhancing their students' understanding, and their students, in turn, will more likely become better writers, living up to the teachers' expectations. If clear communication takes place, more talents and ideas emerge, which is, after all, what teachers really want from their students.

## Reference

Tannen, D. (1994). *Talking from 9 to 5: How women's and men's conversational styles affect who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done at work*. New York: William Morrow.

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