Effective communication can be challenging.

Strike that. Effective communication can be complicated.

No . . . elusive.

Any way you look at it, effective communication can be problematic. Finding the right word is certainly part of the problem, but more to the point, what we say and do to communicate can easily slip the grasp of those we intend to reach. Though we like to imagine that our communication is always received in the same way it is delivered, only arrogance or ignorance could mask the realization that the messages we impart are invariably subject to—and often succumb to—the demands of effective communication. We compete with formidable forces whenever we engage in the communication process.

For example, assume our goal is to be clear; that is, to facilitate as much fidelity as possible between our intended meaning as a communicator and a listener’s interpretation of our meaning (Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006). What variables or factors could potentially jeopardize communication effectiveness in this case? Clarity, being a message variable, could interact with environmental variables, such as the level of ambient noise surrounding the communication dyad. Other message variables, such as our nonverbal behaviors, could also interact with verbal aspects of clarity. An example of this would be wild or asynchronous body language that confuses or undermines verbal language, which otherwise may otherwise retain desirable characteristics for clarity. A third consideration is personal characteristics, both our own and the listener’s. These include, for instance, biological factors, such as the listener’s sensory traits, and psychological variables, such as our anxiety level. Other considerations might include certain cognitive and affective characteristics, which could in part direct how both we and our listeners approach the communication process. Some of these characteristics include knowledge structures, idiosyncrasies of understanding and conceptualization, belief systems, value orientations, and attitudes.

Taking all of this into consideration, one can plainly see that a good many obstacles might exist to stand in the way of effective communication. As George Bernard Shaw once put it,
the problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred (Lewis, 2006). Warden Martin, in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, put the problem into simpler, yet equally memorable terms: “What we have here is failure to communicate.” Yet, the difficulties associated with communication can be even further compounded when we adopt different assumptions about the process. Our understanding of the constraints on communication changes when the process is assumed to be an interaction or a transaction, as opposed to merely an action (see Figure 1).

When communication is seen as an action, the process has a clear beginning and end, the message of the source is of principal concern to effectiveness, and the source and the receiver do not switch roles. The communication process is assumed to be rhetorical, in that the message properties primarily serve purposes of influence and persuasion. Research on teacher communication, a large portion of which emerged through the process product paradigm, has been primarily based on this assumption (Brophy & Good, 1986; Criuckshank & Kennedy, 1986; Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986; Rink, 1994; Silverman, 1994). However, in its most complex interpretation, communication is assumed to be transactional, such that a beginning or end to the process is less obvious, the messages of both the source and the receiver are important to effectiveness, and the source and the receiver continuously switch or even simultaneously share roles. Both the interactive and transactional models assume communication to be less of a rhetorical process and more of a relational process, in which “meaning is mutually created and shared among individuals” (Mottet & Beebe, 2006, p. 24).

![Diagram of Instructional Communication Models](image-url)

*Figure 1. Instructional communication models (adapted from Mottet & Beebe, 2006).*
Research on expert teaching indicates that expert teachers approach instructional communication in ways that can help us to understand certain relational aspects of the teaching-learning process. Classroom studies have focused on expert teachers’ explanations and expository discourse (Leinhardt, 1987; Sanchez, et al., 1999). Leinhardt examined expert classroom teachers’ explanations in terms of both the subject matter content embedded in the explanations and the explanatory plan. These aspects of the teachers’ explanations were compared with student knowledge growth over eight days of instruction. A major finding of Leinhardt’s study was that the experts’ explanations were built upon a system of scaffolding, whereupon new material presented to students was connected with “older familiar information” (p. 279). A particularly important finding was that tests and interviews revealed that students’ conceptualizations of the new material improved dramatically.

More recently, Sanchez et al. (1999) found similar results in comparing the expository discourse of expert and nonexpert classroom teachers. Experts uniquely constructed clear explanations contingent on intermittent evaluations of communication effectiveness through questioning and interaction with students during classroom discourse. In this way, new information (“the new”) was added to old information (“the given”), then evaluated for clarity, and finally followed by more new information in a cyclical fashion. The researchers also found that the expository discourse of the experts was rich with supports and transitions, as well as logically sequenced and focused. In contrast to the experts, prospective teachers did not make attempts to connect new material to student knowledge, and their instructional communication strategies were less focused and less logical.

Sport instruction research over the last decade has also revealed several instructional practices of expert teachers that illustrate how relational communication processes function in certain educational contexts. While working in the Sport Instruction Research Lab as a doctoral student at the University of Georgia, I became interested and involved with lab studies focusing on the instructional practices of expert golf instructors. Two of these studies, which were completed prior to the start of my tenure in the lab, had reported that expert golf instructors teaching new students asked a large number of questions during lessons that were videotaped for analysis (Baker, Schempp, Hardin, & Clark, 1998; Schempp et al., 2004). The experts were reported to have asked a great deal of questions in their lesson openings, with the intent of getting students to talk about themselves and learning about students’ backgrounds. This opening strategy was linked to other instructional strategies the experts engaged over the course of their lessons, such that information gathered from the students was used to personalize the lessons. Essentially, the experts demonstrated an impressive ability as listeners, in that they captured information from the students that they perceived to be relevant for instructional purposes, assimilated this information into a framework for teaching, and utilized the information to be effective.

Based on these findings, I led a study further examining the lesson closures of the expert golf instructors and also expert tennis instructors who had been videotaped as part of a larger investigation of expert teaching (Webster, Connolly, & Schempp, in press). Certain findings from that study lent increased support to the idea that relational communication processes underpin instructional expertise. Most notably, an emergent theme in the instructors’ closing
practices was the use of what was termed a “student-engendered” review of target information from the lesson. In this form of review, the experts “[solicited] questions from their students and then used the topics of inquiry as bridges to the main points covered in the lesson.” Thus, receiver-oriented communication behaviors once again appeared to be an important feature of the experts’ approach to instructional communication.

Most recently, my dissertation study compared four expert and four novice golf instructors in terms of their instructional communication (Webster, 2006). The study examined teachers’ instructional behaviors, concerns, and strategies, as well as student perceptions and outcomes of the teachers’ instructional communication. My findings suggested that the teachers’ communication-related behaviors, concerns, and strategies were all linked. As found in the studies by Baker et al. (1998) and Schempp et al. (2004), experts used personalized communication behaviors, such as asking students questions about their personal interests and aspirations. These behaviors were related to concerns about building rapport with and getting to know the student. The communication strategies of the experts emerged as the nexus between the teachers’ concerns and behaviors. Experts had clear and focused mental plans that began with being effective listeners, moved toward communicating golf content through working examples and giving explanations that pulled from student interests and goals, and ended with ensuring that the student could take ownership of the lesson content. Novices’ communication behaviors were less personalized, were rooted to concerns about getting the student to formulate a conceptualization of the content that matched the teacher’s, and were emergent through strategies that originated from, proceeded with, and closed with a “transmission mode” of thinking. Little to no effort was made to listen to students or to develop a sense of the student as an individual learner. The overall effect was a less student-centered instructional communication approach.

Findings relative to student perceptions and outcomes of expert and novice communication suggested similar differences in the teachers’ instructional approaches, but no differences in the outcomes of expert or novice forms of communication (Webster, 2008b). Students of both the expert and the novice teachers were able to recall target information from their lessons after a two-week interval. Moreover, both groups of students perceived their teachers’ communication behaviors to be associated with a wide range of positive instructional outcomes, such as a comfortable learning environment and increased understanding of the teachers’ instruction. These findings are consistent with previous research on expert teaching in that relational communication processes were shown to be helpful with respect to the learning process (Leinhardt, 1987). However, the results of my study also support a long line of school-based research indicating that rhetorical communication processes can serve many purposes in relation to effective teaching and student learning (Mottet, et al., 2006).

Based on the research to date, the central theme in expert teachers’ communication appears to be a tendency to personalize the learning process by using instructional strategies based on effective listening and monitoring of student verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Experts seem to be able to very quickly assimilate and use the information they gather from students for instructional purposes. Although there is little evidence that this strategy should be credited for any differences between instructional outcomes associated with expert versus
nonexpert teaching, we need to ask ourselves why a more personalized instructional approach could be important to meeting our educational goals. Classroom research indicates that personalizing instruction through the use of relevance messages is primarily important to increased student motivation (Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006). These types of messages play an important role in relation to student affect for the teacher and the content, and may even serve to increase students’ motivation to continue engaging with course material after a course is finished. Furthermore, it would seem that making lesson content relevant to students depends in part on knowing what motivates students, and that this knowledge is acquired through developing an understanding of students on a personal level. We might therefore conclude that effective teacher listening can also play an essential role in certain affective outcomes associated with the learning process.

How important are affective outcomes, such as student motivation, to our educational goals in physical education? As always, the fundamental questions that should be driving our research efforts are “What instructional outcomes are we most concerned about as educators, and what can we do to effectively promote these outcomes?” In physical education, changes in behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes relative to physical activity are important to our educational mission. In the introductory chapter of these proceedings, however, Daryl Siedentop states that we need to increase our focus on “pedagogical issues surrounding the idea of value” (p. ??). Thus, while questions related to links between teacher communication, increased understanding of physical activity concepts, and increased participation in physical activity undoubtedly merit a great deal of our attention, we should also give considerable thought to questions about how instructional messages relate to increased affect for the subject matter of physical education and increased motivation to be physically active. As Steve Silverman makes clear in his chapter of these proceedings, there is already promising evidence that physical education teachers can play a critical role in students’ attitudes toward physical activity.

In addition to focusing on teacher communication and affective learning in physical education, we also need to become more aware of the different teacher, student, and contextual factors that compete with our efforts to be effective communicators. At present, we still know very little about how instructional message variables interact with teacher and student cognition, teacher and student philosophies or orientations, teacher and student characteristics, curriculum content, class size, or school culture. Until we know how and why teachers structure instructional messages in relation to these variables it will behoove us to continue to examine teacher communication so that a well-grounded and robust theory of instructional communication can emerge to guide educational practice (Webster, 2008a). My dissertation study indicates that teachers’ cognitions alone can help us to translate that which is observable in teaching into more meaningful terms.

Mark Twain once wrote that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and lightning bug (Schmidt, n.d.). The statement suggests that even the most subtle change in our communication can significantly alter the impact of our messages, whether for better or for worse. Making the right choice in how we communicate depends on a great deal of insight and intuition—two qualities commonly
found in experts (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988). These qualities develop in accordance with our growing understanding of a problem and the solution it requires. Perhaps finding one right word, one student at a time, is the expert teacher’s solution to some of the many problems inherent to effective communication. You never know—it could mean the difference between the momentary glow but quick fade of communication that almost works in teaching and the electrical explosion of communication that energizes and illuminates the spirit of learning.

References


