Increasing Student Motivation Through Teacher Communication

Six Essential Skills Every Physical Educator Should Master

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Good communication often takes more than just speaking.

The vast scope of literature dedicated to motivation in physical education underscores a pervasive problem in the gym: unmotivated students. Currently, theories of motivation grounded in self-determination and achievement-goal tenets prevail in much of the research (Blankenship, 2008; Standage, Gillison, & Treasure, 2007). These theories emphasize the importance of teacher behaviors and class climates that support perceptions of autonomous learning and encourage self-referenced goal-setting and task mastery (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Nicholls, 1984). Akin to these lines of inquiry, though out of the limelight, is an evolving discipline of study concentrated on teacher communication and its influence on a number of student variables, including motivation. The discipline of instructional communication investigates “the role of communication in the teaching of all subjects at all levels” (Sprague, 1992, p. 1). Although little known outside of its field, instructional communication research thrives on four decades worth of evidence that shows that teachers who employ certain verbal and nonverbal behaviors in class have more motivated students than teachers who do not employ these behaviors (Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). Unfortunately, this research is limited in its scope, as most studies have been conducted in college classrooms. But given the implications the research holds for other educational contexts, it seems the time to remove it from the shadows is past due.

The purpose of this article is to use instructional communication research as a basis to suggest ways in which physical education teachers can use communication for motivational purposes. When used effectively, instructional communication lends itself to student motivation through both rhetorical and relational means (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). Good rhetorical communicators have learned to convince students that the topic of instruction is important and worth knowing. Good relational communicators have learned to send signals to students that say “I understand you, and I am here to help you.” Both rhetorical and relational communication skills are essential to motivating students in class. This article outlines six skills that every teacher should have in their instructional repertoire. The first three are rhetorical: being clear, communicating relevance, and using humor (table 1). The second three are relational: showing immediacy, manipulating presentation style, and listening (table 2). Studies make a convincing case that these skills support student motiva-
tion in class and even promote a desire to take similar classes in the future (e.g., Anderson, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Cahn & Frey, 1992; Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006; Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Wanzer & Frymier, 2002; Witt, Wheelless, & Allen, 2004). By using these skills, teachers should be able to increase their chances of effectively communicating to any student why physical education is his or her favorite school subject.

**Being Clear**

Part of being a good rhetorical communicator is having the skills to communicate clearly. Convincing students that the content of a lesson deserves their attention depends on the teacher’s ability to present information in a straightforward and concise manner. There is no easier way to lose students’ attention than by convoluting an otherwise clear presentation with false starts (e.g., “Today we’re going to... no wait, scratch that...”), vocalized pauses (e.g., “Um...”), or mazes (e.g., “Our focus today is going to be on the serve but first let’s talk about the forehand”). The key elements to a clear presentation include maintaining topical continuity, introducing new material in a step-by-step manner, using examples, cueing students to focus on critical elements of a skill, demonstrating, checking for understanding, reviewing periodically, and signaling transitions to new ideas or topics (Chesebro, 2002; Rink, 1994; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). The following is an example of a well-structured presentation:

*The focus of today’s lesson is on the tennis serve. Watch as I demonstrate (demonstration) the serve several times and keep your eyes trained to the movements my body makes from start to finish. See if you can identify what I do consistently each time. Okay, now that you’ve had a chance to see what the serve should look like, let’s examine each step to success. The first step (introducing new material in a step-by-step manner) to performing a good serve is to make sure your nondominant foot is pointed toward the target*

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<tr>
<th>Communication Skill</th>
<th>What to Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Being Clear**     | • Avoid false starts, vocalized pauses, and mazes.  
                      • Give straightforward explanations and maintain topical continuity.  
                      • Present new material in a step-by-step manner.  
                      • Work in supporting examples.  
                      • Cue students to critical elements of a skill or task.  
                      • Demonstrate.  
                      • Check for understanding.  
                      • Review periodically.  
                      • Signal transitions. |
| **Communicating Relevance** | • Demonstrate how one area of content relates to another area of content (e.g., explain how the overhead strike with a racket is similar to the overhead throw).  
                      • Link lesson content to students’ personal goals (e.g., explain how learning to play golf could help a student pursuing a career in business).  
                      • Link lesson content to students’ personal interests (e.g., use examples that students can relate to from their outside-of-class life, such as pointing out what the dance students will be learning was featured on “Dancing with the Stars”).  
                      • Link lesson content to students’ personal learning needs (e.g., teach students about the way humans build a stronger mind to help them better understand the overload principle). |
| **Using Humor**     | • Avoid sarcasm, other-deprecating remarks (e.g., jokes made at the expense of students in class); and politically or religiously affiliated uses of humor.  
                      • Poke fun at yourself (e.g., “I apologize for my poor demonstration, which naturally wins the prize for Worst of All Time”).  
                      • Poke fun at the lesson content (e.g., “The next step in the dance is called a shimmy. It would be shame to shimmy too slowly”).  
                      • Use physical comedy (e.g., a funny demonstration to show examples of the way a skill should not be performed).  
                      • Use puns (e.g., direct students to “give each other the run around” in a chasing and fleeing activity).  
                      • Tell jokes aimed at no one in particular. |
Communicating Relevance

Most people know what it is like to sit in class vacantly hearing the teacher drone on about something that begs the questions, "Why do I need to know this?" and "When will I ever use this information again in my life?" What is missing in the teacher’s instruction is the message that students are waiting to hear that connects what is being taught to something they can relate to on a more personal level. The communication of content relevance involves linking lesson content to students’ personal goals, interests, and learning needs (Frymier & Shulman, 1995).

Frymier and Shulman (1995) operationally defined content relevance with 12 teacher behaviors, such as "uses examples that make the content relevant," "links content to other areas of content," "helps students understand the importance of the content," and "uses student experiences to demonstrate or introduce a concept" (p. 46). These examples illustrate the range of strategies that teachers can employ to connect lesson content to students’ goals, interests, and needs. A student who has set a goal to increase his quickness and agility in football can be informed at the beginning of a tennis unit that he will have many chances to practice these skills in class since they are paramount to good tennis performance. A student who enjoys a basketball unit but is skeptical about the new soccer unit can be alerted to the fact that basketball and soccer share much in common because they are both invasion games. A student who enjoyed previous success in a throwing-and-catching game can be told that those skills will transfer when faced with the challenge of learning an overhead strike with a racket. By communicating content relevance, teachers make clear the "why" part of learning and satisfy students’ need to understand the utility of the content both inside and outside of the classroom.

Using Humor

Ask anyone about their most memorable teachers and they will probably tell you about someone who made them laugh. Humor can serve multiple functions in the classroom, including helping students relax, gaining students’ attention, creating a comfortable learning environment, and increasing students’ affect for the subject matter (Wanzer, 2002). People tend to attach feelings about lesson content and the teacher to emotionally charged learning experiences. A teacher who uses humor during instruction can generate powerful feelings in students for better or worse.

Humor must be used appropriately if it is to facilitate student motivation and learning. The appropriate use of humor generally lies in the teacher’s ability to gauge the humor orientation of the students and adapt his or her use of humor accordingly (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). For instance, some students respond better than others to sarcasm. Safe uses of humor for most classroom environments include self-deprecating remarks (i.e., when the teacher pokes fun at him or herself), content-deprecating remarks (e.g., pointing out that a dance move looks silly), physical comedy (e.g., demonstrating what not to do in a comical way), puns (i.e., plays on words, such as telling students in a chasing and fleeing activity to “give each other the run around”), and age- or school-appropriate jokes aimed at no one in particular. In most cases, teachers should avoid making jokes at the expense of students, either as individuals or as a class. Attempting to inject humor into current events, political issues, or religious institutions, though it has the potential to awaken some students to important cultural phenomena, is also not recommended because it can offend students who hold strong beliefs and attitudes regarding the subject of the teacher’s comments. Most importantly, teachers should never attempt to be humorous if they have to force themselves to do so. Students can easily detect when a teacher’s communication lacks a genuine and natural feel. Teachers should start with what they feel comfortable trying and, when they experience positive results, they should build on what worked.

Showing Immediacy

We now transition to what teachers can do to increase their effectiveness as relational communicators. Whether they know it or not, every teacher sends signals to students that communicate their level of approachability (Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006). Almost everyone has had teachers at both ends of the spectrum. On one end, there is the teacher who can be questioned, seen after class if extra help is needed, laughed at when demonstrating silly behavior, and even poked fun at within certain boundaries. On the other end, there is the teacher who seems to keep his or her distance, maintains a straight face, and refrains from making eye contact with students, leaving the impression that it is in students’ best interest to stay quiet and seek help elsewhere if needed.

Instructional communication, which researchers term nonverbal behaviors, establishes physical or psychological closeness and “immediacy” between teachers and students (Andersen, 1978, 1979). More immediate teachers use behaviors such as making eye contact, smiling, using vocal variety (i.e., changing pitch, pace, and tonality when speaking as opposed to speaking in monotone), removing objects (e.g., large equipment) between themselves and students, moving around the classroom, using humor, and gesturing (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003). Students of more immediate teachers have reported more positive feelings toward the subject matter and the teacher than students of less immediate teachers (Witt, Wheless, & Allen, 2004). Moreover, one study linked teacher immediacy to students’ in-class motivation to learn (Frymier & Shulman, 1995).
Manipulating Presentation Style

When asked to describe their favorite teacher of all time, people might choose words like “animated,” “relaxed,” “friendly,” “dramatic,” ”impression-leaving,” “attentive,” and “open.” In fact, these very characteristics have been associated with effective teaching, more so in any case than characteristics such as “dominant” and “contentious” (Sallinen-Kuparinne, 1992). Norton (1978) understood these characteristics and others to define different teacher communication styles. He believed students could perceive different teacher styles and, of course, he was right.

No one has only one style. Rather, teachers typically fluctuate within a certain range of styles. For example, some teachers may be animated, dramatic and impression-leaving, which all involve similar communication behaviors. Being animated involves the use of hand gestures and bodily movement to give emphasis to verbal instruction. Dramatic teachers may use similar nonverbal behaviors as animated teachers, but more specifically use the behaviors within the context of telling stories or jokes. Teachers who are impression-leaving make an impact on students through their use of distinct or unique nonverbal language (e.g., a teacher who stands on his or her hands to deliver instruction—believe it or not, this person actually exists). Teacher styles communicate how literal messages should be interpreted and, since students tend to pay more attention to what teachers do than to what they say, the importance of manipulating style to leave a positive impression and carry important messages cannot be overstated. Recent research on communication styles in teaching stresses the importance of being able to balance assertiveness with responsiveness by maintaining versatility in one’s range of styles (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006).

Listening

The most important communication skill has been saved for last. Most of the aforementioned skills require as a prerequisite that the teacher carefully attend to students’ verbal and

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<tr>
<th>Communication Skill</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Showing Immediacy</td>
<td>• Make eye contact with students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Smile often.</td>
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<td>• Use vocal variety.</td>
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<td>• Remove objects between yourself and students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Move around the classroom environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use humor.</td>
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<td>• Gesture with hands.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manipulate Presentation Style</td>
<td>• Be animated (e.g., use hand gestures when speaking, move around the classroom environment, speak with expression).</td>
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<td>• Appear relaxed (e.g., avoid seeming nervous, use a calm voice, be even-tempered).</td>
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<td>• Be friendly (e.g., smile, laugh, interact with students on a personal level).</td>
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<td>• Be dramatic (e.g., tell stories, tell jokes, act out scenarios or role play with students).</td>
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<td>• Leave an impression (e.g., get students’ attention by using unusual antics or instructional methods).</td>
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<td>• Be attentive (e.g., make eye contact with students, listen to students when they speak to you, pay attention to students’ learning needs).</td>
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<td>• Be open (e.g., avoid crossing your arms, position your body to face students when speaking or listening to them).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>• Maintain eye contact with students when they are speaking to you.</td>
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<td>• Be still when a student is speaking to you.</td>
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<td>• Avoid interrupting when a student is speaking to you.</td>
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<td>• Nod your head to indicate you are listening.</td>
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<td>• Pay attention to students’ verbal and nonverbal language.</td>
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<td>• Identify critical cues (e.g., words students use to describe a concept).</td>
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<td>• Determine the meaning of students’ cues and the implications for instruction.</td>
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<td>• Rephrase what a student has said to check your understanding of their message.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Adapt your communication and instruction to what you learn about students through interaction with them.</td>
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nonverbal behaviors in class, perceive the most critical cues for instructional decision-making, interpret the meaning of those cues, and remember and respond to this information in appropriate ways (adapted from Purdy, 1997). Being clear, for instance, cannot happen without an understanding of the target audience and the capacity of its members to keep up with the teacher’s pace of instruction. Further, one cannot communicate content relevance without knowing something about students’ prior understanding, knowledge base, interests, and goals. To maximize communication effectiveness, the teacher must have successfully acquired information about students through the enactment of well-developed listening skills.

Being a good listener is not easy. Most people view teaching as more of a rhetorical process than a relational one and therefore do not spend much time learning to listen well. As indicated above, effective listening can be understood in terms of both behavioral and cognitive processes (Wolvin & Coakley, 1993). In behavioral terms, teachers must attend to students’ verbal and nonverbal language, such as the words that students choose to describe what they mean or whether or not a student makes eye contact with the teacher. In cognitive terms, the teacher must then recognize which student communication behaviors are the most meaningful and then use information-processing to interpret these behaviors, store encodings in memory, and retrieve the information for instructional purposes. Teachers should be aware that students perceive how well their teachers listen to them (Cahn, 1984a, 1984b; Cahn & Frey, 1992). Maintaining eye contact with students when they are speaking, being still, head nodding, and paraphrasing what the student has said are several useful strategies a teacher can use to signal to students that he or she is listening to them (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). In addition, the teacher who responds to students in ways that let them know he or she understood what they said and has thought about it carefully encourages students to continue interacting with the teacher and sharing information that promotes better use of individualized instructional strategies (Cahn & Frey, 1992). A study of expert golf instructors showed that, in the first several minutes of a lesson, they adapted their immediacy, relevance, style, humor, and clarity behaviors based on what they learned about students they had never worked with before (Webster, 2006).

Conclusion

This article has provided physical education teachers with six ways to increase their instructional communication effectiveness. Decades of research leave no doubt that communication is central to the teaching-learning process, in large part because it helps to motivate students to want to continue learning the subject matter (Mottet et al., 2006). Not only is communication central to effective teaching, but recent research also suggests it is central to expert teaching. Schempp, McCullick, Busch, Webster, and Mason (2006) found that expert golf instructors self-monitored their instruction and communication more than other aspects of their teaching. Without question, learning to be a better communicator translates into increased teaching effectiveness. Developing rhetorical and relational communication skills will enable teachers to connect with students, help students identify a personal purpose for being in class, and allow students to realize their full potential as learners in physical education.

References


Continues on page 39
issues and plan appropriately. Additionally, it is essential to coordinate with legal counsel and create a participant waiver that releases from liability those who organize, promote, and sponsor the event. The participant registration and waiver forms at ISU also include a photograph release so that event pictures can be shared with various media sources, as well as with NAGWS and the WSF.

Summary
Planning and hosting a NGWSD event provides an opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to actively promote and engage in meaningful education-based, community-connected service-learning, while simultaneously providing K-6 girls with an opportunity to explore and experience sport and activities they may not normally have an opportunity to participate in. This physical fitness opportunity is particularly important given the Idaho State Physical Education standards for kindergarten through fifth grade, which focus on skilled movement, movement knowledge, physically active lifestyle, personal fitness, and personal and social responsibility (Idaho State Department, n.d.a., n.d.b., n.d.c.). The NGWSD gives young girls the opportunity to pursue all of these goals and provides a fun and exciting way to encourage their athletic and fitness development. Events that celebrate and showcase girls and women in sport, such as NGWSD, can sow the seeds of ongoing educational and athletic aspiration.

References

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