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HOW DO TEACHERS TRANSMIT THEIR ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS ?

Part 2

More About Teacher Talk in the Classroom

*J. Dwyer

In an earlier article (*The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.7, No.3, 1979) I explored the idea that we, as teachers, may transmit our attitudes and expectations to our pupils through our accommodating and non-accommodating moves towards them. I suggested that we might observe such moves if we monitored our language behaviour against our intentions, as these are modified by our beliefs and attitudes, and by the on-going interaction. I proposed a model to help us explore the motives underlying our own accommodating and non-accommodating behaviours; to help us explore how these motives affect the kinds and extent of shifts we make; and to help us explore the effects of these shifts on the whole class or on groups of individuals within the class. I indicated that the aim of such exploration would be to sensitize us to the extent to which our language behaviour signals, both overtly and covertly, our own attitudes and expectations to our pupils.

I would now like to look more closely at some of the items in the tentative list of 'measures' of accommodation that I detailed in that earlier article. In particular, I would like to look at questions in the classroom; at how teachers organize talk and use talk for organizing; and at joking in the classroom.

QUESTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

We teachers ask lots of questions although we rarely make a genuine request for information. We often fail to realize that to ask a question is to claim a right - the right to impose on people's time and energy and to initiate or to continue an interaction which may be used to reflect on the identity, status and character of those involved.

* Mr John Dwyer, Queensland Education Department, Brisbane.

Thus, questions involve attitudes and values as well as requests for some sort of action or information. A question without a legitimate motive may be perceived by the hearer as wasting his time and as implying a conception of him as someone whose time is not worth much. Teachers are on dangerous ground here. Pupils are well aware that we know the answers to most questions we ask. Questions then become tests. Through them, teachers claim authority in a way which is quite foreign to normal discussion. How such questions are asked, and answers dealt with, particularly when Aboriginal children are involved, may be critical for establishing rewarding personal relationships and an environment in which such children can learn.

There is a further issue. Because the child is aware that we teachers already know the answers to our own questions, the problem for the child is to guess what we want. He must draw on his cultural resources to provide an answer that is 'correct' in terms of being 'acceptable' to us. However, the child can display his ability only if his answer conforms to our definition of the situation which includes our view of what constitutes knowledge as well as of appropriate ways of behaving and responding in the situation. Therefore the pupil's ability to match our expectations becomes a determinant of 'intelligence'. Although we are concerned to improve our teaching, it is often the case that pupils become successful through developing methods of 'interpreting' our talk. It could be argued that, for the child, learning how to make it in school involves, in part, learning how to falsify his behaviour. The pupil who chooses to reject conformity to our definition of the situation or who is unable to grasp it may have to pay the price of being labelled 'ignorant'. Here again we teachers need to be sensitive to the demands we make and to the messages we transmit when asking questions and accepting or rejecting answers. This may be particularly important when we are dealing with culturally-different children who bring different 'cultural resources' to the classroom and to the problem of finding 'acceptable' answers. The difficulty is to know how to reject an 'incorrect' answer without rejecting the child who gave it.

The attitudinal element in questioning raises issues of general interest in terms of accommodative and non-accommodative behaviours. How often do we, failing to get a response, order the child to talk? Sometimes these commands may be low key, - "What do you think about this? I'd like to know." Often they are aggressive, "Wake yourself up and answer me!" The conventions for the use of low key or aggressive commands are very sensitive to the relative

status of the speaker and listener. We need to become aware of how, how often, and with whom our behaviour in this respect is based on our status position.

And what of the common teacher habit of repeating children's answers - a phenomenon that rarely occurs in 'normal' conversation? Although this may be used to confirm that we have received new information or to ensure that others in the group have heard what was said, such repetitions are often made with a falling intonation contour which is easily (and often) recognized as patronizing, and hence, in terms of the model, probably as divergent or non-accommodating. In any case, repetitions frequently close off discussions, often causing us frustration with, and further divergence from, the responding child, despite the fact that our repetition may have signalled to him that his response is correct and (in his view) sufficient.

Consider the following extract. Note how the teacher's repetitions limit the chance of any sustained discussion. In fact, in (5), she actually interrupts the child to repeat an answer and to ask a further question, the answer to which the child had already begun to give in (4).

1. Miss S. : What do you recognize in the map?
2. Ruth : Miss, I recognize Selby Rd.
3. Miss S. : You recognize Selby Rd. Who lives in Selby Rd?
4. Ruth : Miss! Miss! Patricia used to live there but she moved. She went -
5. Miss S. : She moved. Where did she go to?
6. Ruth : She went to Wood Green.
7. Miss S. : Wood Green. Which school does she go to now?
8. Ruth : I don't know.

(Perhaps Ruth would have liked to add "and I don't care".)

Another fairly common teaching strategy, likely to be perceived as non-accommodating, is the technique of 'lying' to the child.

"I don't know the answer. You'll have to tell me." We may be surprised to find just how often we use this strategy. It would be worth noting how such 'lies' are perceived, and responded to, by the child.

Finally, have you ever considered the way we demand 'correct' answers to moral questions, the underlying aim being to 'improve the child'?

1. Raymond : Sir, I can't do any more.
2. Mr A. : Yes. Now then - Raymond. I don't know what's got into you this morning but you haven't been in the mood this morning to try hard, have you?
3. Raymond : (Head down. No response).
4. Mr A. : Well! Am I right or wrong?

How this leads to the child's having to anticipate (or resist) the 'correct' answer has already been discussed. The issue has further relevance when we are working with culturally-different children who may hold different social values, so that their responses, perhaps perceived as divergent by us may be convergent in terms of their value system.

It would seem that we need to pay particular attention to how to ask questions and accept and deal with answers, and to how our actions are perceived, particularly by our minority-group children.

ORGANIZING TALK IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers also talk a lot. It could be argued that our first strategy is to impose our definition on the situation by talking most of the time. (Studies have shown that for about two-thirds of the time that teachers and pupils are in the classroom someone is talking, and about two-thirds of that talking is done by the teacher.) Much of this teacher talk has been called metacommunication - talk about talk - a verbal monitoring of the speech situation. It refers to the range of ways in which we control and organize talk in the classroom. Through it we exert control over the channels of communication; over the amount of talk; over the content of the talk; over the language form; and over understanding. We decide how we (and the children) should attract and show attention. We elicit ideas, prompt speakers, provide clues, reject speech. We decide on, and

edit the topic. We elicit and provide examples. We edit and correct language and we provide 'clarification'.

How we effect this control may be critical for the creation of a productive learning environment. We might find it useful to monitor our interactions in terms of these processes.

This talk helps us to define the classroom situation and to uphold this definition. Time after time we hammer home taken-for-granted assumptions concerning appropriate pupil and teacher behaviour - the hidden curriculum. Through this talk we convey to our pupils our conception of what knowledge is and how it should be transmitted. We also provide them with clear guidelines on how they will be evaluated.

Such metacommunication is highly characteristic of teacher talk, not only because of its frequency but also in the sense that it is radically asymmetrical - pupils do not have access to it. Thus, it gives us considerable power. Not only do we control talk, we also control what constitutes knowledge. In addition, we have control over the relevance of what pupils say and even when, how and how much pupils may speak. Monitoring of our metacommunication - our organizing of classroom talk - might alert us to how we are using this power. Do we use it wisely and constructively or, in pursuing goals that we perceive as important, do we diverge destructively from some or all of the children with whom we interact.

TALK FOR ORGANIZING

As well as organizing classroom talk, we use talk for organizing the classroom - for establishing and maintaining order and discipline. In this we are not completely free agents. The 'school' through its values and traditions will impose some restraints on our actions, as will our interactions with our colleagues and our pupils. However, in spite of this, we must decide what our expectations and limits of tolerance are; define these to our class; and get them accepted. If a mismatch occurs between the expectations of pupils and teacher, a tension situation arises.

It is clear that many children value teacher 'firmness'. They see it as the teacher's job to discipline them. They need parameters defined within which they can then work comfortably. Such pupils may evaluate teachers by looking for firmness, good humour and understanding. They value teachers who 'teach you'; who explain; who are interesting; who are fair; and who are friendly. Lack of firmness and of being made to work make school 'boring'. Thus many

children favour structured approaches and prescribed syllabuses. Such pupils have diverged from the view of knowledge and of teaching held by some teachers. However, these teachers need to realize that if they attempt to provide such children with 'open' education, they are immediately in a non-accommodating position. This is not to say that they must surrender their views and their values. But they may need to re-negotiate the 'contract' between teacher and pupils.

A new class is not a clean slate passively waiting for a teacher to inscribe his will on it. It is an ongoing social system with very definite expectations about appropriate teacher behaviour. If these are not confirmed the pupils will protest and the renegotiated patterns of behaviour may not prove to be just what the teacher intended.

(Nash 1976:94)

Thus, pupils expect us to establish rules, but they also expect us to follow these negotiated rules and to behave in ways appropriate to them.

"We will behave properly if you will behave properly." It is in this area of negotiation that the processes of convergence and divergence become very important.

Related to this is the way in which pupils make sense of our commands. It would seem that the 'successful' teacher portrays the 'persons' present in a situation and the context in which to situate them. Teachers commonly refer to 'we', 'I' and 'you' as 'persons' in a situation. The 'successful' teacher uses these 'persons' to help define the situation.

Mr A. : Stop! Stop! This is im - This is important. This is important. Let's clear this up before we go on. (The class is now silent.) Just put your hands down. This is important, Paul. Jennifer is worried about John getting 16 out of 16, because Jennifer thinks John, by getting 16 out of 16 - he'd only get that if he was cheating. I don't give a monkey's whether John gets 2 out of 16 or 16 out of 16. John will know, whatever score he gets, he will know how many he got right - and that's the important thing. If John thinks it's better - it looks better to get 16 out of 16 then, fair enough, if you all want to put 16 out of 16 you can do - but you might just as well have stayed in bed this morning because you're wasting your time and my time -.

This teacher utterance clearly conveys the following definitions of the situation.

- 1) There are rules governing our position here, rules which can be explicitly stated.
- 2) The rules affect all of us (the *we*) without distinction.
- 3) My special position (the *I*) is not that I stand above the rules, but that I can interpret the rules to you if you are in doubt about them.

This definition is not simply conjured up on this occasion. Rather it is portrayed as holding for all occasions. (*See Torode 1976, 183 for this interpretation. My transcript.*)

The successful teacher is also able to meet challenges to the position he has established. A child who cheats or who accuses another of cheating after this utterance is clearly in breach of the 'rule'. However, by using a strategy such as pretending that the offender hadn't heard ('In future use your ears') the teacher can protect the integrity of his definition of the situation.

On the other hand the less successful teacher separates the 'we', 'I' and 'you' so that his 'I' is not both a part of the group and also its interpreter. Only one 'person' has a clear view of the situation, his '*I*' which is not related to the other 'persons' and thus is not accountable to his '*we*'.

Mr T. : I wish you'd stop that noise. Don't you know you should be doing sums now? We'll never get finished at this rate."

In addition his 'context' offers no definition which claims to go beyond the immediate situation. Because he provides no enduring reality there is likely to be confrontation when his pupils' views of the situation differ from his.

It would seem that convergence or divergence is often signalled by the use of 'I' or 'we' or 'you'. Thus, we might find it valuable to monitor how we present these 'persons' and how we establish contexts in which to situate them. In particular, it would be interesting to observe if or when (and why) the Aboriginal child is excluded from the 'we' category or, alternatively, to note who is included in the Aboriginal child's 'we' and 'you' groups.

JOKING IN THE CLASSROOM

It seems to me that joking in the classroom might be the source of both accommodative and non-accommodative behaviours. Joking can serve a number of functions. If we seek to embarrass the child, to make him 'feel a fool', joking is being used as a means of social control. However, joking may also be seen as a way out of embarrassing situations or confrontations. Often joking is used as a contact or entry point into a relationship. It is also used to individualize and make more intimate an on-going relationship. Joking may also be used to present an atmosphere of fun and conviviality. The sort of joking that occurs most commonly in school is not much concerned with punch-line gags. It involves relationships that are suffused with humour and that often depend upon a shared background of experiences. Often the 'joke' is revealed through the ridiculous, or through underplayed status or mock authority. To an observer, joking in the classroom often seems like over-familiarity but it is one way in which social structures can be made 'human'. Through joking the participants are allowed to reveal their *personal* identities despite the *social* identities conferred upon them by their status.

But through this sort of joking we become more accessible and more vulnerable because we break the usual conventions associated with our teacher status. At the same time joking gives us access to the child in a way which is not possible within the constraints of our social identity. Thus, it creates the dilemma of how to define where person - person relationships end and teacher - pupil relationships are re-established. Therefore, if we joke with (not at) our pupils we must be prepared for the unexpected. We must be prepared to become the butt of the joke. We must be prepared to allow pupils access to power because joking marks and creates areas of negotiation, areas where relationships are flexible and open to change.

The following exchange clearly illustrates these shifts in power. (Note also the teacher 'lie' that occurs in (7)).

1. Mr A : Next one. What do they call a man who does magic in Africa?
2. Children : Sir! Sir! - Witch doctor.
3. Mr A. : Which doctor? I don't know.
4. Children : (Laughter) - A *witch* doctor! No, a *witch* doctor!

5. Mr A. : Yes, sometimes called, Dr Who. (Laughter).
6. Mr A. : Yes - a *witch* doctor. (Amused talk).
7. Mr A. : I spent - I stayed up all last night learning all these jokes so I'd be ready for you this morning.
8. Jennifer : (Aside).
9. Mr A. : Did you hear that?
10. Children : No! (Laughter) What?
11. : (Silence)
12. Mr A. : You know we were talking about revolutionaries yesterday! (Yeah! nods of agreement).
13. Mr A. : Here! - Class 15's own revolutionary. When I said I'd stayed up all night learning my jokes, she turned round to me - complete straight face - and said, "What a waste of time!" (Laughter).

Hence, we might find it useful to monitor our joking behaviour. Do we joke with or at particular children? Does the recognized class jester act as a spokesman, testing limits for the class, or is he or she 'used' by us to demonstrate such limits? Are 'harmless' jokes actually perceived as 'hurtful' by the child at whom they are directed (and why were they made in the first place)? Do all children share in the joke or are some children left out - the joke being 'on' them rather than 'with' them? How do we react when we become the butt of the joke? Where do we draw our boundaries in terms of who may be involved, when joking may be allowed and on what topics, and where it may occur?

Have I challenged you to make an attempt to monitor your own language behaviour? As Jackson says,

...it might be wise to foster the growth of observant participators in our schools - teachers, administrators, and perhaps even students, who have the capacity to step back from their own experiences, view them analytically, and talk about them articulately. (Jackson 1968:176)

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- * Refers to authors quoted in the text.

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