IMPROVING QUALITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS BY RAISING TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Abstract

The quality of the educational process can be measured by different criteria. These criteria are based on factors, including good communication as an important aspect. Similarly to good communication being able to improve the quality of life, the quality of the educational process largely depends on the communication ability of teachers or implementers of education. In his or her job, the teacher has to master communication on different levels: with his or her superior (the principal), colleagues, parents and pupils (students). Not only does the teacher have to educate students by example, he/she occasionally also need to provide assistance in solving conflicts so as to avoid peer violence. During their studies at the university, student teachers should acquire good communication skills. Even though these have been introduced in the content of pedagogical study programmes, their extent is still not sufficient. This paper presents an example of trial Communication in Education laboratory work that was implemented with three generations of 4th year students – future teachers of technical education. Their reaction was very positive and they expressed the desire for additional work to be prepared.
Key words: *communication process in the school, personal orientation, reference framework, teacher education.*

Introduction

As communication is an important concept related to all sciences (communication is a multi-disciplined concept) it has lots of definitions (Rimal, Ratzan, and Arntson, 1997; Carey, 1989; Dervin, 1990, Kunelius, 1994). John Dewey's (1916) often quoted notion is: society exists not only 'by communication' but also 'in transmission, in communication'.

Teaching and learning is a part of life. In this process, communication helps determine negative changes in behaviors and expressing ideas and thoughts in mind as well as affecting others. Today, the importance of communication is increasingly rising because it is the fundamental tool of information transfer (Karadag & Caliskan, 2009). Everyone must communicate. But teachers need communication more than anyone. It is an obligation. The only communication is through interaction. Teachers play an important role in children's lives (Karadag & Caliskan, 2009). There are numerous discussions on what makes a good teacher. What qualifications make him a good teacher? What competencies does he need to possess? A teacher should have important qualifications, such as being democratic, tolerant, kind, tender, patient, reliable and humorous to his/her students during the interaction and communication processes (Saka & Surmeli, 2010; Karadag & Caliskan, 2009; Kucukturan, 2011). If she/he wants to teach in an effective way in the process of learning and teaching, she/he should interact properly. However, teachers can make use of communication as long as they learn communication factors.

The quality of teachers' profession is a key element of pupils' success, but few specific

teacher characteristics influence classroom outcomes (Buddin & Zamarro, 2009; Lai, Sadoulet, and Janvry, 2011). One of those is communication skills. An effective learning-teaching process cannot work without communicating. In order to communicate effectively, teachers should be balanced, reliable and have the ability to use different communication channels, which are introduced below (Polutnik, 2009).

Teachers who want to communicate effectively should predict the behaviors of children. As they are the ones who contact, and always speak in front of big groups, they are the pioneers of social behaviors. So they should cope with feelings and conflicts (Karadag & Caliskan, 2009).

In recent years, an increase in peer violence has been noted among youth in Slovenian schools. Survey results (Husanović, 2010) have shown that both physical and psychological violence are present in primary schools, while psychological violence prevails in secondary schools. The respondents noted that they usually notify teachers, friends and parents of the violence. In addition to parents, teachers are the ones who should be well familiar with the foundations of communication and successfully implement them in practice, so as to be able to successfully help young victims of violence.

Foundation of Communication

The Professional Relationship

Pedagogical work is based on a professional relationship. The professional relationships of a teacher are influenced by personal, cultural and other characteristics of the involved parties. The teacher also fundamentally impacts this relationship with his/her personality and professional qualifications. The personal aspect comprises the teacher's reference framework, conscious and unconscious emotional actions, motivations, the ability to generate interpersonal relationships, character, viewpoints and beliefs and the spiritual dimension. Due to the importance of the personal aspect in establishing a professional relationship, the professional qualifications need to comprise not only knowledge and methods but also the willingness – motive and knowledge – to reflect on one's own work and openness to social learning and to developing sensitivity to social actions.

In professional communication, the emotions of an individual are essential, however they need to be controlled (Figure 1).
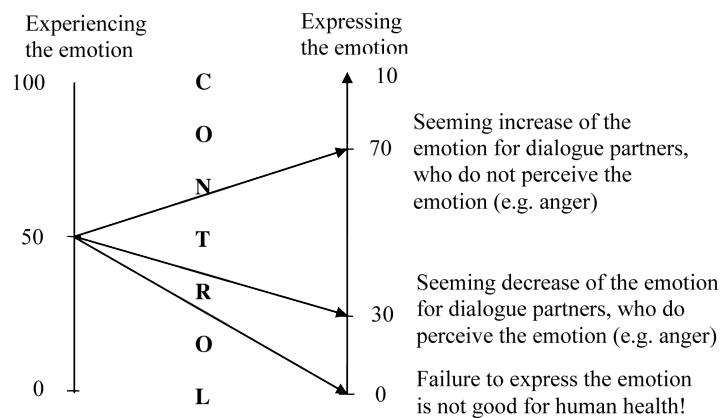

Figure 1: Expressing emotions in professional communication.

The Perception and Communication Positions

In order to control the emotions, it is necessary to understand three communication positions from which an individual communicates with his environment (Polutnik, 2009):

- *Association* – a position from which the individual communicates with an unchanged quantity of emotions;
- *Empathy* – recognizing feelings that are being experienced by another facilitates the transition from the associated to the dissociated position. Empathy means a prudent consideration of the feelings of others, the understanding of their mental and emotional world, whereby the individual remains emotionally dissociated. This is therefore the assumption of another's perspective without passing value judgements on them or their behaviour, which is the foundation of successful communication;
- *Dissociation* – a position from which the individual communicates without including emotions; In a dissociated position, the individual acts rationally and with inner peace. He distances himself from the emotional situation and views the circumstances in an objective manner.

Being adept in communication means being able to move between individual communication or perception positions in relation to the current situation. An individual can increase his or her efficiency in interpersonal relations by being aware of how he/she is acting in this relationship and of his/her orientation toward the social environment.

Behaviour

There are different behaviours that an individual does not see or recognise within himself and therefore cannot control them. These behaviours are however noted by his dialogue partners. This can be shown with the help of the Johari window (Figure 2).
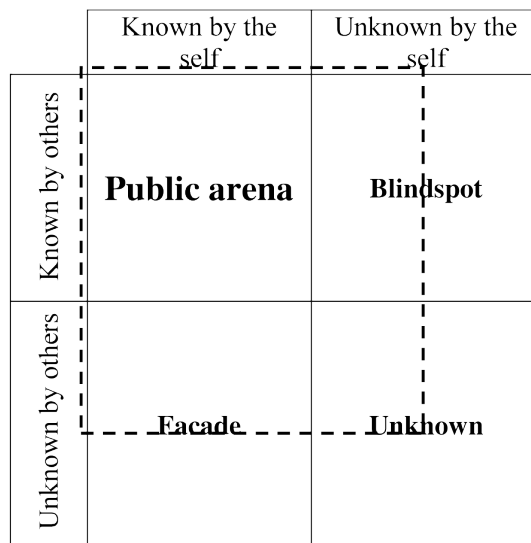
	Known by the self	Unknown by the self
Known by others	**Public arena**	**Blindspot**
Unknown by others	**Facade**	**Unkhown**

Figure 2: Johari's window (Luft and Ingham, 1950).

The *Public arena* is the portion of the total interpersonal space devoted to mutual understanding and shared information. This *is known by the self - known by others* facet of the relationship is thought to control interpersonal productivity. The assumption is that productivity and interpersonal effectiveness are directly related to the amount of mutually-held information. Therefore, the larger the *Public arena* becomes, the more rewarding, effective, and productive the relationship is apt to be. The *Public arena* can be thought of as the place where good communication happens.

One can significantly influence the size of the *Public arena* in relating to others by the behavioral processes you choose to use in your relationships. To the extent that you make others aware of relevant information which you have and they do not, you enlarge the *Public arena* in a downward direction reducing the *Facade* (Luft and Ingham, 1950).

Personal Orientations

An individual's personal orientation importantly affects his communication with other individuals. It is a way of how he sees and experiences himself and others. His personal orientation determines whether he experiences himself or others as respectable beings.

There are four basic personal orientations or positions (Figure 3).

- + I am not OK You are OK	+ + I am OK You are OK
- - I am not OK You are not OK	+ - I am OK You are not OK

Figure 3: Basic personal orientations.

Each basic orientation is characterised by a pattern of beliefs, experiences, feelings and behaviours. The basic life script depends on several factors. In addition to the hereditary factor, the effect of intimate environment in early childhood plays an important role.

During his lifetime, each individual moves through different, more or less successful periods and his orientation may change accordingly. However, one of these positions is more characteristic or prevailing. This position is called the life script.

Once an individual assumes his basic life script in early childhood, he starts being inclined toward selective understanding of the world by strengthening the chosen position. The majority of people are not fortified in a single orientation but move from one to the other in respect of their current situation and the people in their contact circle.

Setting up an equal relationship with the environment (+ +)

In a positive life script, people are optimistic, satisfied and self-confident. They are therefore able to constructively utilise their potential and achieve set objectives. They know their strengths and weaknesses.

In communication, the + + orientation enables equal participation, respect of the personality of all parties, constructive solving of jointly determined objectives and maintaining

internal balance. ASSERTIVE communication is characteristic of people with such orientation. This means that we respect ourselves and others and communicate clearly and directly.

Setting up a superior relationship with the environment (+ –)

In this position, people perceive others as inferior, incompetent and contemptible individuals who cannot be trusted. These people are pessimistic, often humiliate others, are overly competitive and aggressive and overestimate themselves- People with such an orientation often experience anger or even hatred and contempt. AGGRESSIVE communication is characteristic of people with such orientation.

Setting up an inferior relationship with the environment (– +)

People in this position believe others to be superior, more competent and better and in turn feel poorly about themselves and feel unfit for successful work. They have a negative self-image. They are pessimistic and expressively accept a subordinate role and humiliation. Their communication is PASSIVE.

Setting up a worthless relationship with the environment (– –)

This orientation is characteristic of people who are convinced that they cannot win and that life is not worth living. They have a negative orientation toward their own existence and the existence of others. Their communication is CYNICAL.

Transfer of Knowledge to Student Teachers

At the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics of the University of Maribor, the foundations of communication were introduced to three generations of students of the last year of study. The students learned about theoretical knowledge, while different exercises were implemented for better illustration. In these exercises, the students had the opportunity to get to know their own way of communication and their main personal orientation as well as to practice communication skills. They also learned about ways of improving their personal orientation. The basics of communication, which are presented in this paper, were upgraded with examples of conflict situations that teachers face in their daily work. Students learned about ways of resolving conflicts that will help them in their work.

Measurements

After concluding their education, students were invited to participate in interviews, which have given positive results. Students were very satisfied with the content in over 90% of cases. They see substantial applicative value in this content and some even expressed their desire for continuation and additional exercises.

The citation from one of the 60 interviews:

"I enjoyed myself immensely when learning about communication. Resolving conflict situation has become my new challenge. I have learned that skillful communication allows me to improve my relationships with other people and I see additional value in the fact that as a future teacher, I will be able to use this knowledge to help young people get on in life. I would love to attend

further education from this field and try my hand at even more complex examples of conflict situations."

The empirical research is planned in the near future. It will consist of two methods for measuring improvement of communication skills. First, a self-rated questionnaire for evaluation, and the second, self-assessment of students' communicative skills and an evaluation of the course lessons.

Discussion

Communication training programs has been successfully implemented in medical education on different Medical Faculties (Hausberg et al., 2012, Millis et al., 2002). Students who attended the communication skills course exhibited a considerable increase of communication skills in newly developed training. It was also observed that students in the intervention group had a greater degree of self-assessed competence following training than the medical students in the comparison group. This finding is also reflected in the results from a standardized objective measure.

Conclusions

In respect of his dialogue partner, the teachers' experiences different communication positions in his job:
- Attitude to students,
- Attitude to colleagues,
- Attitude to the principle and
- Attitude to parents.

In order to successfully manage communication in all these positions, the teacher needs to apply assertive communication. In communication, conflicts are inevitable and it is thus important to teach student teachers not to avoid these conflicts but to learn how to successfully solve them. These skills will enable teachers not only to establish a better relationship with all participants of the educational process but also to help pupils and students in solving conflicts.

As the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics is aware that appropriate teacher knowledge and skills allows reducing peer violence in schools, the Communication and Conflict Solving seminars for teachers under the auspices of the Lifelong Learning Centre for the third year in a row, have been implemented.

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