Teaching Eye Health

Communication and Effective Teaching

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The previous article in this series examined some important concepts related to ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’. In this article we take a short look at the role of communication in teaching. The article aims to make readers more aware of the importance of communication in teaching, and hopes to give some ideas of how readers can improve their own teaching practice.

Communication

What is ‘communication’? According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary the word means ‘the act of imparting, especially news’, or ‘the science and practice of transmitting information’. These definitions clearly show the link between ‘teaching’ and ‘communication’: teachers are constantly imparting new knowledge, or transmitting information.

Hubley has shown us that communication is a complex process (Fig. 1). At any stage of this process things may go wrong, making the communication less effective. For instance, the sender may not express what s/he wants to say clearly; or the room may be noisy; or the receiver may not understand the words the sender is using. To be effective, teachers have to try to minimise these barriers to communication.

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However, the most important way to overcome the barriers is two-way communication. We do this in a number of ways – for example, by making sure that the room is quiet and well lit; by speaking slowly and clearly; by only using words which the students should be able to understand. Communication does not only take place by means of words; non-verbal communication (or body language) is equally important. We are all familiar with the different kinds of non-verbal communication (Fig. 3).

This kind of communication is usually subconscious – we use it without thinking about it; that is why we say that ‘it is difficult to lie in body language’. If teachers really attend to the body language of their students they will know when they are bored or confused.

Person-to-Person Communication: Presentation Skills

In the previous article we discussed different styles of teaching. Some teachers like to talk, and expect the students to write down what they say and to learn it (this style encourages superficial learning - and rapid forgetting!). Other teachers see their role as one of helping the students to learn at a deeper level - to understand new ideas and concepts so well that they can apply them in a work situation. Either way, these teachers will do a better job if they communicate well with their students.

An important element of communication in teaching is the use of teaching aids. We have all heard the saying: ‘What I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I know’. Pictures, written posters and practical demonstrations improve communication and we should use them as much as possible. Most of us have access to paper, posters, a chalkboard, or an overhead projector. We can use these to prepare aids for our lessons: summaries of important facts, or pictures and diagrams. The overhead projector is particularly useful, because it allows us to face our students while using it.

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How can I know whether I am communicating well as a teacher? Communication is a skill – and we improve our skills by getting feedback on the way we perform them. We can get such feedback by asking an experienced colleague to sit in on our teaching, and to give us feedback. We can also ask someone to record us on a videotape as we teach, which we then inspect critically afterwards. In either case the feedback will be better if we use a checklist to judge our performance. Fig. 4 gives such a checklist.

**Written Communication: Handouts**

Teachers communicate by speaking, but also by writing. We have seen how we can improve the overhead projector transparencies we use, if we write them carefully. The same is true of the handouts that almost all teachers prepare for their students. What is a handout? It is not a photocopy of a journal article, or of some pages out of a textbook. Rather, it is a document which the teacher writes him/herself. It may be a summary of important points to be learnt; or a guide to students on work they have to do, or references they have to look up. Teachers may use handouts for students to refer to during a lesson, and students will definitely use them in their self-study time. Because handouts are such an important way of communicating with students, they must communicate effectively. Fig. 5 provides a checklist which should help you to write better handouts.

These days many teaching institutions have websites where teachers put their handouts for the students to find. It doesn’t matter whether the handout is on paper or on a website - it still needs to be well written.

**And Finally**

All health workers need to communicate well, if they are to do their work well. Unfortunately, many are never taught how to do this. Teachers of health workers, therefore, also have to teach their students to be better communicators. We will learn more about this in the next article in this series.

**References**