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ABSTRACT

Learning the values of respect for the individual, fairness, responsible exercise of freedom, and belief in each person's ability to understand democracy is possible. Students should learn to practice four communication habits: the habit of search (teaching students that they are accountable and responsible for what they say); the habit of justice (teaching students to present facts and opinions fairly); the habit of preferring public to private motivations (teaching students to openly reveal their information sources); and the habit of respecting dissent (teaching students to allow and encourage diversity of viewpoints). Possible outcomes that may result from the teaching of such values and habits are: (1) students could learn important conflict resolution skills which may be useful in their familial, student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and community relationships; (2) students may learn that diverse voices enrich perceptions and increase understanding, cooperation, and compromise rather than the reverse; (3) students may learn that how a person communicates tells a great deal about ethical character and genuine orientation toward communicating; and (4) students may learn to participate in lively and spirited discussions about the issues of the day. Nominal group technique, a small group exercise during which members alternate between individual work in the presence of others and verbal interaction as a group, is a recommended technique for working with students on communication ethics. It is a step-by-step exercise in which the teacher can customize effective questioning and guidance. (TB)

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TEACHING COMMUNICATION ETHICS BY ENCOURAGING VALUES AND HABITS

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Teaching Communication Ethics by Encouraging Values and Habits

ABSTRACT

Learning the values of respect, or belief in the dignity and worth of the individual; fairness, or belief in equality of opportunity (of expression); freedom coupled with responsible exercise of freedom; and belief in each person's ability to understand democracy are possible by teaching students to practice four communication habits. The habit of search, the habit of justice, the habit of preferring public to private motives, and the habit of respect for dissent engender such values and make possible other worthwhile benefits. One benefit is that students may learn important conflict resolution skills. Another benefit may be the establishment and maintenance of more peaceful and friendly relations. Third, students may learn that inherent in communication are serious ethical considerations. Finally, students may learn the skills necessary to participate in lively and spirited discussions concerning important issues of the day.

Students' values and habits are shaped by a variety of influential persons and phenomena such as teachers, parents, classmates, those with whom they play, and, in addition, society and media. In spite of the variety of influences to which children are exposed, a general view herein is that teachers are *instrumental* in such developmental processes as the shaping of values and habits. In this context, instrumental can be taken to mean that teachers have uncommon or special potentials, skills, and opportunities to help students shape values and habits that are conducive to maintaining peaceful relationships. In addition, another general view herein is that children can be taught and need to learn *communication values and habits* which, if practiced and made manifest in their speech and acts, could significantly reduce conflict and create and assist in the maintenance of more peaceful relationships. The learning of communication values and habits can be applied in a host of contexts such as in the classroom between teachers and students, between students and students whether at work or play, and in the broader communities consisting of highly-divergent relationships in which children are active participants.

The recommendations that follow are rooted in literature from the fields of *communication* and *communication ethics*. Communication ethicists have contributed substantially to the field of communication by recommending many ethical guidelines and precepts of communication. Teachers may consider helping

students become familiar with such guidelines and precepts. What follows is a friendly plea to urge teachers to encourage students to consider and incorporate into their lives four values and four habits of communicating, each of which has ethical implications. Further, it is believed that values and habits may be taught by asking students to engage in group discussion. The technique proposed later in this paper is commonly referred to as the Nominal Group Technique.

Communication Values and Habits

The four values I encourage you to consider in your teaching are the values of "respect, or belief in the dignity and worth of the individual; fairness, or belief in equality of opportunity (of expression); freedom coupled with responsible exercise of freedom; and belief in each person's ability to understand democracy," (Johannesen, 1990, pp. 2-22). In this context, the ability to understand democracy means to promote and accept the expression of both persons of diversity and diverse ideas. Wallace (1955), was the first in the field of communication to offer or isolate these values in The Speech Teacher (1955). Johannesen, in a widely-used communication ethics text, rested a portion of his text on the scholarly advice of Wallace. In a sense, Wallace and Johannesen help us see into our educational futures the importance of teaching values. These values, point out both Wallace and Johannesen, may be incorporated or made

manifest in speech and actions by practicing four habits. These four habits are the "habit of search," the "habit of justice," the "habit of prefer(ing) public to private motivations," and the "habit of respect for dissent" (Johannesen, p. 22). In a capsule, one claim being advanced is that the earlier-mentioned values may be nurtured as we encourage students to practice these four habits in their communicative practices. As an aside, and yet perhaps clearly worth mentioning, it seems such habits may well be worth considering and modeling in many of our educational settings which consist of an inestimable number of exchanges with students, other teachers, and administrators in both private and public settings. Further explanation of the four habits appear warranted in order to illustrate that each has a clear communication focus, the designs of which are to serve as guidelines for the shaping of values.

We could nurture the *habit of search* in a number of ways. First, we could teach our students that when communicating they are the primary and sole source of the view being expressed. Second, students could be taught to recognize and come to appreciate the importance of reflection and thorough knowledge of the subject, to be sensitive to issues and implications relevant to the subject, to be aware of essential and trustworthy opinions and facts relevant to the subject, and to be aware that most subjects about which they communicate are complex rather than simple. Third, we could also teach our students to ask themselves an

important question such as, "Can I provide good solid answers, without evasion, to those questions my receivers may have?" The habit of search is about teaching our students the critical importance of knowing they are entirely responsible and accountable for what they say, that they have a duty to know about that which they speak, and that when questions arise they have both a responsibility and duty to respond to diverse points of view in a way that suggests familiarity with the many issues, opinions, and facts relevant to their messages as originally expressed.

The second habit that teachers could nurture in students is the *habit of justice*. In this context, the habit of justice has to do with selecting and presenting facts and opinions fairly. Further, students should be taught not to conceal or distort data that listeners need to carefully evaluate the views being expressed. In addition, students could be taught to avoid using emotionally-loaded language. With the habit of justice in mind, we could teach our students to ask themselves the question, "As I select and present my views, am I giving my listeners an opportunity to make fair judgments?"

The third habit teachers could encourage their students to consider is the *habit of preferring public to private motives*. Students could be taught to openly reveal the sources of their information and opinion. Receivers should be made well aware of any biases, prejudices, or self-centered motives which are present in the

sender or sources that are being used as support. A test question teachers could encourage students to ask themselves about motives is, "Have I concealed information about either my source material or my motives which, if revealed, would damage my case?"

The fourth habit that teachers could encourage students to consider in their communication is the *habit of respect for dissent*. Students could be taught that they should both allow and encourage diversity of views. In essence, students could be taught to seek compromise and cooperation rather than try to force their views on others by closing off alternate voices. A relevant question students could be taught to ask themselves is, "Can I freely admit the force of opposing views and evidence and still reasonably advocate a position which represents my convictions?"

In addition to the previous questions students could be taught to ask themselves, there are a number of questions students could be asked which may further establish worthy values and habits. What follows is a discussion technique designed to help bring about such an end.

Teaching Communication Values and Habits Through the Nominal Group Technique

Teachers may encourage students to adapt worthy communication values and habits by leading focused discussions. Although specific questions will shortly be recommended, it is assumed that custom-making questions for particular classes or students may be useful or necessary. Further, it is assumed that individual teachers best know their students' idiosyncracies, skills, or capabilities. Nevertheless, general discussion questions may be viewed as worthwhile points of departure as we concern ourselves with the teaching of communication values and habits to our students. In order to engage our students in lively discussions, a variation of the nominal group technique may be used.

Briefly stated, the nominal group technique is a small group discussion exercise during which members of a group alternate between individual work in the presence of others and verbal interaction as a group. Brilhart and Galanes (1992, pp. 313-315) offer a fairly complete explanation of this discussion technique. The following is a condensed explanation of the nominal group technique that is believed to be workable in this context.

The first step is to divide the class into small groups of six to nine members. The second step is to ask each of the members to silently record their responses to question(s) posed by the teacher. The third step is to ask students to offer their

responses to the small group. During this stage of the discussion students are also expected to tell why they have responded to the questions in the way they did. During the fourth stage of the exercise students are asked to volunteer and state publicly their responses to the questions, and the reasons for their responses to the questions for the entire class. At this time, students from the entire class are encouraged to react to contributions by stating why or why not such a response is illustrative of the communication values and habits described earlier.

Using this discussion technique, teachers may then ask their students to reflect and respond to such questions as the following:

1. Do my speech and acts reflect that I value the dignity and worth of individuals?
2. Do my speech and acts reflect that I value another's right to express her or his ideas?
3. Do my speech and acts reflect that I responsibly exercise my freedom to express?
4. Do my speech and acts reflect that I am truly knowledgeable about that which I communicate?
5. Do my speech and acts reflect that I select and present my views openly, fairly, and honestly?

6. Do my speech and acts reflect that I openly reveal the reasons or sources of my opinions?

7. Do my speech and acts reflect that I openly reveal my biases, prejudices, or self-centered motives?

8. Do my speech and acts reflect that I both allow and encourage diverse views, even though such views may be very different than my own?

These and other questions which teachers may custom-make may be useful as we try to encourage our students to consider adopting worthwhile communication values and habits.

Discussion and Implications of Teaching Communication Values and Habits Through the Nominal Group Technique

Students need and deserve guidance as they struggle with adapting important and lasting values and habits regarding their communication practices. As stated earlier, teachers can be instrumental in these developmental processes. Stated briefly, recognizing the *values* of respecting the dignity and worth of others, recognizing the importance of equal opportunity for expression, recognizing we are free to discuss and yet must responsibly exercise that freedom, and recognizing the value of true democratic discussion can be encouraged and nurtured by the

communication *habits* of search, justice, preferring public to private motives, and respect for dissent.

At a minimum, even though I believe there are many more, there are at least four possible outcomes which may result from the teaching of such values and habits. One possible outcome may be that students could learn important conflict-resolution skills which may be very useful in their student-to-student, student-to-teacher, familial, and various community relationships. Another very important outcome may be the realization that diverse voices enrich perceptions and increase understanding, cooperation, and compromise rather than the reverse. An exceptional benefit to this outcome could be the establishment and maintenance of more peaceful and friendly relationships. A third possible outcome may be the realization that communicating has very serious ethical implications. The point herein is that *how* one communicates tells a great deal *about* one's ethical character and genuine orientation toward communicating. A fourth, and it seems to me a quite useful outcome, may be lively and spirited discussions reflective of an important mission we may strive for in common and yet accomplish in different ways, the teaching of our students to be responsible participants in the ongoing conversations regarding important issues of the day whether public or private.

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