

Module # 4

Reading Students' Nonverbal Behaviors: What Are Your Students Saying When They Don't Say Anything?



The aim of this module is to help you:

- Recognize and understand the students' behavioral cues
- Create a classroom environment that promotes behaviors that maximize students' learning
- Gain insight into how to intervene in specific situations
- Identify teaching skills you need to effectively address students' behavioral cues

Are your students tuning in or tuning out?

We have all been there before: you are 10 minutes into a class, you just posed a very thought-provoking question, and you are awaiting the students' response. The room is silent, but instead of hearing a pin drop, you hear the tapping of one student's pencil, and the nail biting being done by another student in the back of the room. Two other students are looking out the window. . . . The silence hangs heavy in the room. Students are avoiding eye contact with you, as they begin to fidget in their seats. You are prepared with another question, which you offer up like a lifesaver, hoping that someone will grab onto it. Again, silence . . . you know it will be a long class today!



Decoding Students' Behaviors: What Are They Really Saying?

Even when your students are not saying a word, they are still telling you volumes. Their body language, posture, and eye contact are all silently conveying information to you about their energy level, enthusiasm for the topic, and attention span. Learning to read these nonverbal cues can help you keep the conversation moving and sustain an engaging seminar session.

Most of us are at least intuitively aware of the class energy and realize that it has an impact on the group experience, but we are unsure how to respond when energy is lacking. We notice when our students seem to have low energy but often remain silent about the situation. We are aware that one student continually puts his head down on his desk, using class time as his naptime, but we do not single him out, for fear that an overt intervention would alienate him from the rest of the class. In general, we are uncertain how to intervene effectively and raise the energy level in the class.

! As we discuss various classroom behaviors, it is important to note that, as Lewin (1951) first suggested, behaviors are a function of the person [the student] and a given environment [the classroom]. Thus, it is often a mistake simply to try to “manage” behaviors that instructors find frustrating. Such behaviors may have underlying causes that are worth exploring.



Getting off on the Right Foot: Setting Norms Early

As we noted in **Module # 5** (Group Dynamics, Norms, and Structure), you can make it explicit at the beginning of the semester that you will pay attention to the students' nonverbal behaviors. You can explain how class participation will play a role in your grading scheme, and define what “participation” means to you. You can also use this topic as a springboard for one of your first class discussions by asking your students:

“What does participation mean to us in this class? What do we expect from each other as members of this seminar? What makes for a good seminar?”

Types of Nonverbal Behavior

Engagement

What it looks like:



Verbal contributions, sharing of opinions with instructors or peers. Also: students writing notes (as distinct from doodling) or reading notes, engaging in eye contact with the presenter, raising their hands, flipping pages, asking or answering questions. These are indicators of engagement, even though they may not be related to the goal of learning. (Incidental discussions, or “small talk,” can be a sign either of engagement in learning or of distraction. Sometimes, instructors ask students to share their small talk with the rest of the class, so everyone can have the benefit of their spontaneous ideas. If the small talk really is relevant to the discussion, the request will not come across as mere sarcasm.)

What they are telling you:



Your students are energized and ready to engage in a task that is meaningful to them at that moment. If they are engaged in the task of learning, you have captured their imagination and interest. If they are otherwise engaged (chatting with peers about weekend plans, writing notes to another student), you have an opportunity to reorient them to the task at hand. Then again, if the off-task students make up only a tiny minority of the class, it is up to you whether an intervention is worthwhile or will only be a distraction in itself.

How to increase Engagement:



Engagement is most likely in sessions where the reading, writing, and discussions are integrated with the students’ own experience (see Kolb et al., 2003). To increase students’ engagement, you can:

- **Address each student by name.** This is important, because students need to be recognized and respected as unique individuals. If they feel that their instructors are paying attention to them, it is more likely they will behave in a civil and respectful manner, even if they are bored by the topic.
- **Keep eye contact with them.** Students feel included in the discussion when you maintain eye contact with them. It shows them that you are interested in a potential response.

- **Engage with them by eliciting and sharing personal experiences.** Showing your personal side reduces the chance that the students will see you only as an authority figure. You will appear more approachable when students know some personal information about you.

Fatigue or Disengagement

What it looks like:



Yawning, stretching, closing of eyes for more than a few seconds, supporting the head with one or both hands, leaning or hunching over the table, slouching in the chair or leaning back outstretched, looking out the window.

What they are telling you:



These behaviors are typically seen during early morning, late afternoon, or evening classes. You might see an increase in these behaviors during midterms and finals, when students aren't getting enough sleep. But an increase may also indicate that your students aren't paying full attention to the discussion. Perhaps they are bored by the topic, or don't understand it; perhaps the course requires a learning style that they are not used to. Some students may have "checked out" entirely and are no longer following the discussion at all.

! We all have our natural biorhythms. Not all of us are at our best at 8:30am, or at 4:30pm. Students' attention spans will vary even in the best seminars, lectures, or presentations.

Sometimes, having quieter, lower-energy days is actually productive; such days may open up the seminar for typically quiet voices to come forward. What we need to ask as we look around the classroom is whether our students' behaviors are in the service of our primary learning goal—that is, whether their behaviors are helping to maximize their learning. If not, then it may be an appropriate time to intervene.

There is no magic decoding ring that will help us read our young adolescent's feelings. Rather, what we need to do is hold out our antennae in the hope that we'll pick up the right signals.

How to decrease fatigue:



There are many things that can affect the energy level of your class—beyond your voice! For example, the temperature of the room, the time of day, and even the amount of natural light can make a difference. While having an occasional “down” day is normal, there will be times when you want to energize your class. At such times, consider:

- **Having class outside**
- **Having a class in a new building/room (even off campus!)**
- **Bringing in music to start a class**
- **Changing the seating arrangement**
- **Breaking students into pairs or groups to discuss a topic**

To redirect the students’ energy, it is sometimes necessary to turn away from the instructional content and discuss the experience that you and your students are having in the “here and now.” This shift in focus may be a departure from the lecture mode that your students are used to; but for just this reason, it may lead to a better learning environment. For example, you might ask:

TRY THIS

“How does everyone feel about the energy in this class at the moment?”

One or a few students might admit to feeling tired. Most students might remain silent. You continue: *“Have I lost some of you by going too fast?”*

By simply making an observation or asking a question that is related to the students, not to the topic at hand, you are signaling that their experience is important to you and that you are paying close attention to them. This fact alone reminds the students that *they* are your top priority. Such simple sentences are usually enough to redirect their energy into what’s happening in the moment.

Restlessness

What it looks like:



Physically shifting positions while sitting on the chair, or getting out of the chair to leave the room; foot tapping, leg whipping, playing with or chewing on pencils or other objects (e.g. hair, fingers, face, watches); scratching, chewing gum, blowing bubbles, unzipping bags or folders, tapping fingers, nail biting, examining or filing nails, pulling on sleeves, adjusting pants, sweaters, or jackets; doodling, checking pagers and cell phones, adjusting bandanas, taking off/putting on eyeglasses or hats; bouncing or swiveling in chair.

! Students will often engage in other types of behaviors that could be seen as fidgeting, such as eating in class, leaving class to get a drink or going to the restroom. You can decide early on whether you want to set class norms allowing these or not. An increase in such behaviors can indicate that students are becoming restless or annoyed, at which time it may be an issue you want to address.

What they are telling you:



When a student walks out of the classroom, it can mean that he needs a break, that he wants to signal annoyance, or simply that the current topic is not fascinating enough to keep him at his desk. During times of high stress, students may walk out of the classroom in disproportionate numbers. When students are required to do something that exposes them to criticism, they seem more likely to fidget, shift positions, or engage in other activities that indicate excess energy (diffuse, not focused). This seems to happen particularly during exam time, and when the students are required to perform before a critical audience.

It is not enough to offer a smorgasbord of courses. We must insure that students are not just eating at one end of the table.
~ A Bartlett Giamatti, President, Yale

How to decrease restlessness:



While it is quite normal for these behaviors to emerge at various times during the semester, you can respond to them in ways that will create a more energetic and engaging class. For example, you can do a “process check” with your students, just as you would if they were fatigued, and talk about what is going on in the room. If you see a lot of fidgeting, shifting positions, etc., you may want to ask yourself if you are:

Challenging the students too much:

- By using materials that are too difficult for the students to understand
- By pursuing topics that are not relevant to their experience
- By varying the class structure unpredictably, without planning

Challenging the students too little:

- By lecturing at length without seeking their active involvement in a discussion of a relevant topic
- By not calling on students who are holding up their hands with a response or comment
- By not following up on a student's response and by not questioning him or her further
- By making the students feel they are just a number (not knowing their names, or a personal story about them, or any of their interests)

Asking these questions will help you decide on a corrective course of action.

Captivation

What it looks like:



Eye contact with whoever is speaking, little or no body movement, attentiveness, head nodding in agreement with the speaker, erect posture. People who were chewing gum stop doing so, apparently not conscious of it at all!

What they are telling you:



These behaviors indicate that students are paying keen attention and that they are engaged by the person who is speaking. This typically happens when someone unexpectedly shares a personal story, or when the students are participating in focused, small-group discussions or planning sessions. It also happens when dynamic guest speakers or highly knowledgeable instructors are talking about a subject that is relevant to the students' lives or otherwise interesting to them.

How to increase Captivation:



Captivation, like engagement, is most likely to occur in seminars where the reading, writing, and discussions are integrated with the students' own experience (see Kolb et al., 2003). To increase the students' captivation, you can:

- **Use reading materials that are developmentally appropriate and relevant to the students' lives.** Students tend to participate more when the topic is of personal interest to them. You may want to give them their own choice about topics.
- **Challenge the students within the context of a supportive, caring and respectful environment, where diverse opinions are welcomed.** These elements constitute the core of a good seminar.
- **Try using various discussion formats, such as having students work in small groups or discuss a topic in pairs.** Shifting to a different discussion format may help open up traditionally "quiet" students, who are less comfortable talking in a large group.
- **Present brief, well-punctuated lectures in support of student discussions, the topics of which ideally emerge from within the student group.** Research shows that the students' attention span begins to wane even after a brilliant and dynamic 10-minute presentation. Hence our emphasis on "brief" and "well-punctuated" lectures.

We must continually remind students in the classroom that expression of different opinions and dissenting ideas affirms the intellectual process. We should forcefully explain that our role is not to teach them to think as we do but rather to teach them, by example, the importance of taking a stance that is rooted in rigorous engagement with the full range of ideas about a topic.

~ Bell Hooks

Playfulness

What it looks like:



Incidents of energy introduced into the class, such as joking, laughing, and bantering.

What they are telling you:



The students are relaxed, amused, and often re-energized as a result of the laughter or lightheartedness. This is often an indication that they are comfortable with each other and with you, and feel that the environment is a safe space.

Quiet Reflection

What it looks like:



Lingering silence; the students are pensive, thinking about the preceding content (a statement made, a question asked, etc.)

What they are telling you:



This is the kind of silence that permits students to ponder certain facts, to reflect on something they heard, or to think before they speak. The silence feels comfortable, and there is no sense of a void or something missing in the moment.

! During a prolonged silence, many instructors feel compelled to interject something to “get the class going” again. However, it is better to hold off and wait for the students to pick up the topic. They always will, if you just wait long enough, and often with surprising comments. Enjoy the silence and give it space.

Awkward Silence

What it looks like:



A silence that is often followed by students rolling their eyes at each other, or looking down, apparently trying to ignore what just happened in order to hide their embarrassment.

What they are telling you:



Awkward silences feel different from quiet reflection. This is the kind of silence that occurs when you tell a joke and it “falls flat”—that is, when it is followed by silence, instead of laughter—or when

you ask a question and no one answers. A sense of an uncomfortable void fills the room; students may avoid eye contact and begin to move into a restless mode.

How to intervene:



If you sense that there is an awkward silence after you propose a question to the class, you may need to rephrase your question or comment. Sometimes students do not always follow what you are saying, and you may need to try saying it in a different way. Alternatively, you may need to switch topics for a while, or even try opening up the conversation to your students; for example:

“We can come back to talking about _____. What do you all have on your minds right now? How did you react to the reading last night?”



SPECIAL TOOLBOX:

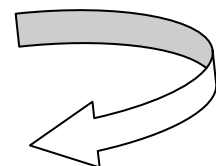
How to Intervene with the Unusual Student

There may be a student or two who revels in “being different.” This behavior can take many forms and can be conscious or unconscious on the student’s part. For example, you may have a student who will defiantly sit outside of the circle. You may also have students who are not trying to be defiant, but whose nonverbal behaviors are distracting. For example, students sometimes engage in nervous behaviors throughout class, pulling on their hair or squirming whenever they speak. You may notice other students saying “uhh...” or “like” after every third word. Inevitably, you will also have students who will rarely come to class prepared. These kinds of behaviors can be very distracting to the class as a whole. Do you say something or choose to ignore the behavior?

The “safe” way is to ignore the behavior and let the student be who he or she needs to be at the moment. Nothing humiliates a person more than to be singled out in front of the class, especially with respect to behavior that appears to be mostly unconscious. Some “tics” are a developmental phenomenon. Others might be an invitation to a power struggle between a student and you, if you choose to engage in it. You have to ask yourself:

Is the behavior hindering learning for others in the class?

If the answer is YES, then what do you do?



You can refer back to the norms that you established with your class at the beginning of the semester. You can remind the students that they agreed **“to create a learning environment that is caring and considerate about everyone in the class.”** Then, you can intervene in situations that are moving the class away from this ideal.

If a student is sitting by himself, you might invite him into the circle by creating a space for him, or ascertain that he is comfortable sitting where he is. Perhaps by the next class, it will no longer be an issue, because you paid attention to him. **Students want to be noticed and treated as individuals.**

In the case of the student who pulls her hair in a disturbing fashion or engages in other behavior that distracts the rest of the class, you may wish to talk to her individually some time, and ask whether she is aware of the behavior and its impact on the class. In fact, she may not be aware of it; and once you point it out, she may be motivated to bring the behavior under control. **By talking to students outside of class, you show that you care about them and avoid embarrassing them in front of the other students.**



?? Questions for Reflection

?? Questions for Reflection

Questions for personal reflection:

- "Well-timed silence hath more eloquence than speech."
- Martin Farquhar Tupper**
When is silence in the classroom appropriate and beneficial?
When is silence telling me I need to do something different?
- When have I noticed my students were most engaged? What was I doing?
What was the topic? How did the conversation ensue?
- What can I learn from class today? What did I notice about the students' behaviors? What would I do differently next time? What would I keep the same?

Questions for reflection with colleagues:

- What have you done in your class when no one wants to talk?
- What have you seen that most energizes your class?