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The Web of Classroom Exchanges

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Much of the give and take in a classroom rests on a tangled web of assumptions, understandings, and exchanges that are rarely openly discussed or consciously examined. Goffman (cited in Finders, 1997) writes that in any social institution, “underlives develop” (p. 24). Vandrlick (1997) writes about hidden *identities* in the ESL classroom, and the ways in which such identities (e.g. religion, sexual orientation, disability) may affect classroom dynamics. Here we discuss the closely related issue of hidden *exchanges* in the postsecondary ESL classroom: exchanges of behaviors, favors, support, and other items, mostly intangible. By exchanges, we mean that each party knows that she/he is expected to give certain things, and that she/he can expect to get certain things, and that the two—giving and getting—are at least somewhat reciprocal. Even when the behaviors given or received are visible, we propose that both teachers and students keep a hidden, unacknowledged, and generally unconscious mental tally and that each attempts to make sure that there is a sort of rough balance of giving and receiving.

Since our experience is with international and immigrant students in U.S. universities, we are particularly interested in how the cultural differences that exist in ESL classrooms impact this web of unconscious assumptions. Speaking of these matters may be uncomfortable, and acknowledging such mental tallies may challenge instructors’ sense of themselves as professional, mature, and above such considerations. However, we believe that only by bringing such possibilities out into the open can we honestly assess and deal with the consequences of the complex web of teacher-student interactions in our classrooms.

Both teachers and students have a certain, often idealized, image of what the classroom is like. We teachers believe that we are professional, competent, and dedicated. We also assume that students will generally follow certain rules, spoken or unspoken, and that they will give us attention, respect, effort, and even appreciation. In turn, students generally assume that instructors will be prepared; give them information, skills, and attention; and be fair. In addition, teachers and students are supposed to give each other certain subtle indications that they understand this unspoken agreement. It is a delicate network of assumptions that we must constantly monitor and maintain.

What happens when either an instructor or a student does not follow the rules? What happens when, for example, a student is (or is perceived as) rude, inattentive, disruptive, or overtly or covertly challenges the instructor's authority? What if a student shows insufficient appreciation? Does the teacher resent this and perhaps unconsciously punish the student? What happens when an instructor is (or is perceived as) unprepared, uncaring, or unfair? Do students feel cheated and perhaps show their resentment, in effect punishing the teacher? In either case, does the wronged party feel that the bargain between them has not been kept, not been honored? Does she/he respond in turn with anger and resentment? For example, do teachers who feel that the contract has been broken, that something seems out of balance, then feel that something may have to be done to restore that balance? If that something is reducing a student's grade, giving the student less attention, or allowing a note of sarcasm in the voice, teachers usually don't want to examine their motivation for these actions too closely. But they may be keeping a tally and, in effect, balancing the equation, maintaining the equilibrium.

It should be noted that the unconscious tally is actually well understood in some cultures. For example, according to Ruth Benedict, in Japan there is a "principle of reciprocal exchange...many interactions between individuals in Japan were controlled by requirements to keep emotional 'accounts' in balance" (paraphrased in Schneiderman, 1995, p. 41). For example, if one person gives a gift, the receiver should give something in return, of approximately the same or higher value. If one person gives a compliment, or offers support in a difficult situation, the other should reciprocate. Thus some students in ESL classrooms may be much more aware of the concept of unspoken exchanges than their teachers are.

What are the interactions or events which enter into this tallying of exchanges? First let us look at the instructor's expected contributions to the system of exchanges that make up this complex web.

Instructor's Contributions

What do instructors give their students? First, of course, they give them instruction. Second, they give validation and certification, whether in the form of grades, certificates, or letters of recommendation. They give academic advice and sometimes personal counseling. Sometimes they do favors for students, such as allowing them to hand papers in late. They may give certain students extra time, extra attention, or extra encouragement. They compliment students' efforts and achievements. They sometimes organize social events.

Many of these contributions may seem to be obvious, merely a regular, integral part of teaching. But that is the point: These kinds of actions happen all the time, yet we rarely stop to think about what they mean, when and why they occur or do not occur, and how they fit in with all the other interactions going on simultaneously in the ESL class. However, there are choices involved. We know that some teachers do the bare minimum for their students, and/or seem to resent doing more. And even the majority of teachers, those who give much to their students, may occasionally feel put upon if their students are not giving them something in return—attention, appreciation, effort, for example.

Student's Contributions

Some of the same issues regarding exchanges exist for students as well. They have choices about whether they give the bare minimum in class, or more. For example, students can decide whether to participate actively in class discussions, thereby rescuing the teacher when the discussion is lagging. Even when a student may not feel comfortable speaking much in class, her/his paying careful attention in class, when others are not, can be a much-appreciated favor that may be remembered in future interactions. In addition, students may give positive or negative formal or informal evaluations of the class and teacher. These evaluations may make an enormous difference to a teacher in an institution where such evaluations are used for retention or promotion decisions.

One thing that ESL students seem to do more often than other students is to give instructors gifts or invitations to dinner or to visit them abroad. When these behaviors do not involve a great deal of money, they are often appreciated. When they do involve a great deal of money or are ill timed (e.g., just before an examination), problems arise (Messerschmitt, Hafernik, & Vandrick, 1997). Teachers must demonstrate tact in explaining to students just what the problems are.

Power and Culture

This web of exchanges in the classroom is related to power. Generally the instructor has quite a bit of power over students, and must be aware of that power and careful about its use (Lakoff, 1997). Yet students have some counterbalancing power through, among other things, their ability to evaluate and to disrupt, or refrain from disrupting, the classroom.

Although students and teachers generally know their roles, and understand each other's roles, cultural variables can undermine this understanding. Expectations of evidences of power in certain roles can be upset by seemingly contradictory signals. For example, a teacher with an informal style may unwittingly lead students to expect a kind of anything-goes, lenient grading system. Or a certain type of teacher, often found in ESL classrooms, who projects a very caring, nurturing persona, may also lead students to feel that she/he is on their side and will not judge them negatively. If these teachers' students have to be reprimanded or disciplined for plagiarism or some other form of cheating (as defined in the country where the class is, but which may or may not be defined as cheating in the students' cultures), the students may be shocked by what they perceive as an unexpected and unfair about-turn in the teacher-student relationship. Similarly, if these teachers' students receive low grades on their examinations, they may be equally shocked, and even feel that they have been somehow misled or betrayed by the teacher.

Other Variables

Regarding the web of exchanges, other variables that might affect classroom dynamics include the question of whether an instructor's comments to students are general or specific. From the student's point of view, when faculty comments are general, in other words, to a whole class, they may have less impact than when the comment—positive or negative—is directed to an individual. The more intense impact of a comment aimed at an individual can be beneficial but also harmful, particularly if it is an oral comment given in front of other students. Language proficiency is, naturally, another relevant variable. Students who are well intentioned may blunder or appear rude because they just don't have the vocabulary or grasp of the language to deal with nuances or to be diplomatic. In addition, for both students and teachers there are human variables, such as age, gender, experience, naiveté, and personality. For example, in some cultures it is expected that older people will be deferred to; in some cultures it is expected that males will be deferred to, or that females will be treated with extra care, as if they are fragile. In addition, students who have less experience in the academic world, in any culture, are more likely to misunderstand the

formality level required or the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain remarks to certain people in academic settings. Different understandings or expectations regarding any of these factors may lead to the perception that there is an imbalance of exchanges.

Attitude

Much of the feeling participants have about exchanges in the classroom comes down to attitude. This is something intangible but usually very clearly understood by both parties: Are we on the same side or not? Are you for me or against me? Are we helping each other or obstructing each other? If we are on the same side, we help each other. We make the whole system work. If we are not on the same side, both participants generally suffer.

The display of attitude can be subtle; it can be shown by where someone sits (in the front of the classroom or at the back, alone or next to friends one talks with constantly), posture, hesitancy or lack thereof, and volunteering or lack thereof. Of course one must, again, take into account cultural factors, such as the tendency of some students from certain areas of the world to speak less in class because their educational system does not promote such discussion. Instructors should monitor themselves to make sure they are not unconsciously getting angry at, or penalizing, such students for not participating. In fact, it is important that instructors value the mix of discourses and styles brought to the classroom by their students (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). Other factors too, such as simple misunderstandings, or differences in personal styles, can lead to misinterpretations of attitudes, with possible negative responses resulting.

Another important psychological factor in the classroom, related to attitude, is the image people want to maintain of themselves, both to themselves and in front of others. Classroom participants' (both teachers and students) helping each other to maintain their images is an essential part of the web of exchanges, and such mutual maintenance or lack thereof may well be included in the mental tally being kept by participants. First, everyone needs to preserve self-regard. People need to feel good about themselves, their motives and their behavior; they need to be able to justify their behavior to themselves. Second, people need to preserve their images in front of others; they need to "save face." Goffman (1959) asserts that most people need to maintain idealized images of themselves and their own motives.

Cross-cultural research indicates that people from certain cultures particularly value face. For example, regarding doing business in Hong Kong, Morrison, Conaway, and Borden (1994) state that "The word 'yes' does not necessarily mean 'I agree with you.' A closer meaning would be 'I heard

you.' 'It would be difficult' may be the closest a traditional Chinese businessperson ever gets to saying 'no'" (p. 157). Conversely, according to the same source, the way to lose face in Russia would be to compromise too readily. "Russians regard compromise as a sign of weakness" (p. 317). Although these may be generalizations, they indicate the range of ways in which different cultures attempt to allow people to save face; knowledge of such differences on the part of teachers is very important, and may well increase understanding and acceptance of various classroom behaviors.

Conclusion

Teachers may want to think explicitly about the kinds of exchanges that take place in the classroom, and they may want to use their own understanding of that concept to inform their teaching. They may want to teach students about cultural variables in matters of the web of exchanges and about possible misunderstandings and negative consequences for those who apply the expectations and practices of one culture to situations in another culture. They can also discuss specific aspects of communication in the new culture, such as different ways to save face. Such learning on the part of teachers could take place through reading about cultural differences and communication styles as well as through faculty development workshops on these topics. Teaching students about these topics could take place in orientation sessions at the beginning of new semesters, or could be built into class lesson plans. In addition, teachers should be as clear and explicit as possible in explaining their expectations in their own classrooms as well as the expectations students are likely to encounter in other classrooms. This explicit explanation should be delivered orally and in writing, perhaps in class syllabi, and probably should be repeated several times in different ways, using different examples for illustration and clarification. In addition to learning about and teaching these concepts, teachers may want to examine the interchanges that go on in their own classrooms, perhaps by videotaping some class periods, and/or by keeping notes on their observations, perhaps in a teaching journal.

Although this kind of conscious examination of the below-the-surface dynamics in learning and teaching is unsettling, we instructors in ESL need to acknowledge the impact of power, self-interest, culture, and attitude on the complex web of exchanges involved in daily classroom interaction. Honest self-scrutiny and analysis may make ESL instructors better educators and may make the classroom a better place for all participants.

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