

Classroom Communication Transcript

Hi, my name is Stephanie and I'm currently a fifth year graduate in chemical engineering, I am actually wrapping up my thesis work at this point and will be graduating by the end of the summer. So this is going to be my last chance to be part of the teaching conference, and I hope you enjoy the next 30 minutes with me.

Today I'll be talking about classroom communications for international TAs and others. In this workshop we will mainly address three different aspects.

First expectation of teaching assistant or TAs in the US classroom second tips for classroom communication, including what you say and how you say it. Last but not least, we'll go into some real classroom scenarios that you may run into as a TA and hopefully this will help you to develop some useful facilitation techniques.

To get started, for those of you who are now so familiar with US higher education system. Here is the list of expectations or task for TA. TAs lead the recitations and office hours instead of questions by email or online class page. One thing to note here is that although is pretty well expected responsibility for TA recitation is not just about a TA. It's not about you talking for 60 minutes. It's not like a single revision of materials instead is a really interactive environment and students are highly encouraged to participate as well.

The second expectation is guest lecturing depending on professors, you may have the opportunity to do one or a few guest lectures in a term either just as a training opportunity or because the professor is gone for personal reasons or traveling for conferences.

I would highly recommend that if given the opportunity, you do a couple guests lecturing while you're a Caltech, because it's a really good chance for you to practice all the teaching skills. And a sense of what's like to prepare for a lecture.

And third piece grade assignments and exams, sometimes write problem sets, for example, depending on how the professor is structured for the class.

From the two responsibilities that we just learned, we can see that ability to give good presentation is a big component of being successful TA. However, there is not a single fast or optimal presentation style because everyone is different.

Some of you may be worried, oh, I don't have a big voice or oh I speak with an accent. But the thing we want to make it clear here is that none of these matters. The key of being a good presenter is not speaking the best English but is to be heard and understood. So, today we will address some skills and tips that can help you to become a better presenter and to communicate more comfortably confidently and the fact that we as a TA.

As I mentioned in the outline. I'll address communication skills from two different perspectives, what you say and how you say it first, let's start with what you say. To give a well received lecture or recitation session, we need to be organized and aware of what we want to cover in a given limited time

A lecture often falls and structure of introduction, multiple key points and for each key point we will need to use elaboration reasoning or example or demonstration.

To help us to explain the key points better so that students can learn faster and another a really, really important thing here is that in order for students to make connections between different key points, we also need to use some transition phrase, which I'll talk about later.

To help I'll connect different points together. The introduction of a lecture is extremely important because it says the goals of the entire lecture and also gives your students a heads up in terms of what to expect in the next hour or so.

To help students make connections between different lectures. I also use a strategy called review preview it just like what you see in a TV series every time when you watch a new episode. There's always like one minute recap of what was going on in the last episode, that way it will help you to digest or to recall the storyline better which will help you to understand what's happening. It's the same thing for lecture. So, for example, during the introduction, you can say something like, in the last lecture, we covered ABC. Today we see how XYZ helps us to solve a VC. That way the students can make connections between different materials which will help them to learn

As I mentioned, transition phrases are really important way you are trying to make connections to link different things together. For example, here's a list of phrases that may be helpful as a TA, and I will suggest you start using these phrases now so they use students can follow you better when you talk about when you talk about different points you want in class. Were you trying to explain something really complicated to them.

Here are few common mistakes that people tend to make when they just start TA. And to be honest, I still make these mistakes as well. But it takes practice for you to become a better communicator and just pay attention to these few of these little things. And these will help you to communicate better and more effectively.

Try to avoid using incompatible transitions. Try to avoid overusing the same transition And do not miss counter transition. This happens when you have different points to address. And I think it's really helpful to use numbers to list all the points, but sometimes you may miss count and then that will kind of confuse your audience and you want to try to avoid it.

And then another thing I want to say here is try to avoid too many tangents. So that's a tendency to speak about topics related to the current discussion and easy to use too many tangents. You will also confuse your students as well.

The next big component of what you say is questions. It is very common that in order to get more students or audience involved in the classroom discussion TA is ask questions to their students. So first of all we need to know that the goal of asking questions is not to make your students suffer or freak out instead is to check if the students understand the concept and help them to think deeper. Besides, some people tend to ask questions in a really intimidating way that they themselves don't even realize, but in order to encourage more students to answer your question we asked me to ask questions at genuine invitation.

There are two types of questions: open and closed. It depends on the occasion which one is more suitable than the other. Another thing to note is that when asking questions to try to be direct clear and specific so it doesn't take one student a whole 20 minutes to answer one question.

Another thing that is tied to the last point is to ask one question at a time. So it sounds more approachable and accessible to students again when it takes 20 seconds to answer one question more students will answer it compared to one that takes 20 minutes.

Other than asking questions to your students, teachers are also expected to be ready to handle and answer questions from students. In order to handle questions more efficiently and effectively always let the students know if they can interrupt with questions, or should I save them to the end.

Besides, make sure that you understand the question. If not, don't pretend that you do and get the wrong answer is it's okay to ask the students to clarify the question.

Another thing is to repeat students questions so that everyone in the room or in the room knows what are inserting to this is also quite helpful when you're not giving a talk in a big conference.

No matter which field of study, you are teaching in we often need to deal with tricky words and sometimes these are the major sources of confusion and complexity.

One way to avoid this confusion is to not use jargon or acronym unless introduced exclusively and sometimes even after these terms are introduced. They may still confuse people. For example, I am atmospheric scientist and we often use this acronym called DMA. However, there are two different DMA is in our field that are commonly used by our people and they mean completely different things. One is short for a chemical called dimethylamine and then a second is an instrument called differential mobility analyzer. So sometimes using this term is just confusing with proper context, even to the most senior people in this field. So watch out when you're using jargon or acronym.

Well, another way to deal with tricky words is to write or draw them on the board, or in this case, we can type them in the chat. Here's the example that I really like to use. I personally got them mixed up all the time. So for Greek letters when you're not sure how to pronounce them properly. It's always safe to just draw them. And you can also try to avoid using tricky words by presenting ideas in a few different ways and checking the accent pronunciation spelling for difficult terms.

For those terms that are hard to pronounce you will definitely get better with more practice. So don't get scared or don't get discouraged in the beginning.

So here's a summary of what we went over with what you say. So far, and the next one I'm going to go to how you say it.

Having a good posture is very important when we are teaching and this applies to both physical and virtual setting. So some people may naturally slump or slouch. But when you collapse in your chest you appear less confident and that may send a bad sign to your students, how can they trust you. When you don't seem to be trusting yourself. The key is to sit straight or stand tall and have your shoulders squared and head straight.

Also, watch out for physical signs of nervousness. So, for example, some people when you are nervous you always put your hands in pocket or have your arms crossed, it really makes you look not so approachable or welcoming.

In addition, people also tend to have some mindless movements when you are nervous like rubbing hands together, playing with jewelry or hair and these will make you look less confident. And these mindless movements are even bigger problem now with this virtual of or remote teaching because all that we've got is the small screen and how all these unnecessary movements can really become annoying to watch for your students.

Not slouching doesn't mean that you can't move at all, don't freeze yourself when you're talking. It helps to relax yourself if you can find some movements that feels natural.

And in this case, as long as you keep your movements within the computer screen. It's a good thing to do.

And also when you back to a physical classroom walk around utilize the stage with the blackboard is also very helpful and use gestures and other body languages sometimes help you to look more confident more relaxed and also helps to explain things better.

Another useful non verbal skills is to you use eye contact in a classroom. Eye contact can help to make personal connections and to engage the entire room. It also makes you look more trustworthy and confident in what you're saying. Sometimes staring straight to some stranger may be embarrassing. And one way to avoid that awkwardness is to look at forehead or just above the audience and it still looks like that you're personally interacting with them.

You don't have to look at one person at all, at all time or look at every single person in a room is that choosing a couple places to look back and forth. Helps you to look more natural and relaxed and giving the current remote teaching. So it kind of circumstance is hard to make connections through eye contact by video calls and even harder for those who may not have a webcam in the laptop straight facing their face or for those who prefer to use as extended screen when working. But when you get a chance, please make sure that you look at a camera as much as possible. This is what we call the virtual I contact, it still helps you to engage your audience.

And another thing that helps with engagement in this kind of virtual video setting is when your student is talking or someone else's talking or asking questions, you can lean slightly forward as the person speaks nod or shake your head to show that you're listening to this person.

In addition to all these non verbal skills. We can also improve the way we communicate verbally.

First of all, remember in the beginning of the session we mentioned that the most important criteria for giving a good presentation is to be heard and understood and the key to achieve this goal is to enunciate, that is to say, pronounce every word clearly

We also that have we also said that having a soft voice is not a problem as long as we know how to project your voice properly or how to set up your microphone properly.

For those who have a high pitch tone or a big voice, make sure that you adjust your voice properly when you're talking a small room or using video call because you don't want your students to feel like they are standing, the first row of Coachella when during classes.

We also want to avoid speaking either too slow or too fast because you want your audience to understand what you're saying, but also leave yourself enough time to present all the materials.

Also avoid using long sentences, because people will get confused and lose track with all the fancy grammatically correct or incorrect clauses.

Also avoid using uhmmmm this kind of sounds even need a pause between just pause. Don't say anything. These kind of unnecessary sounds will destroy the flow of the sentence and makes you look hesitant of what you're saying.

The last point, we want to address here is pretty relatable as a personal experience. I think it's safe to say that we all have similar experience with professors teachers or speakers who have flat tones.

And it's just simply so easy for us to zoom out and lose track five minutes after they start talking. We all know how detrimental that can be so let's try to vary tones and pitches when we're talking

To wrap up. We have a dress for different ways to improve the hall, you can say it part of effective communication. So now we have this roadmap complete

In terms of improving communication skills. We can start from these eight perspectives organization transition questions tricky words posture. Eye contact and verbal. And I hope that you found them useful to help you to become a better communicator in the US classroom.

Stephanie Kong: And now we're going to quickly go through feel scenarios. Do you may run into when TA, and I will suggest you to pause after each question and really try to brainstorm and think on your own what you would do.

If you were in your shoes as a practice before proceeding to the solutions that I list here.

Okay, let's start with the first scenario, what would you do if the students idea is unclear confusing or contradictory.

Now it's time to pause and think, on your own

: Here's a list of things that I came up with that could be helpful guide for you if you ever run into this situation, first of all. Paraphrase, or summarize what you think the students that. Here are a few sentences and you can't use And then the next thing that you can try to do is draw people out or ask open ended question to encourage them to explain more. And then the third thing is trying to make connections between their ideas and the topics of discussion.

Okay, so now here we go the next scenario. What are you going to do if no one is speaking or answering the questions that you ask again, pause and try to think on your own.

Here, a few things to I find quite helpful. First of all, wait to allow students to process, give them more time to think.

Rephrase your question. Maybe the question in the beginning people didn't understand. So try to say in another way.

Ask leading questions. So this goes back to how we said there are two types of question open and close in sometime when you ask, like, a really hard opening question, it's helpful to break them down into couple different closed questions. So that will help your students to think faster.

Or change a discussion format. So if we once were back to the physical classroom one strategy that I personally really like is called think pair and share

So that's really encouraging discussion between students and then once they communicate with their peers. They may be more confident in expressing themselves.

And also individual writing. So that's encouraged him to again in another way. Take I'll take more time and think. And this also happens. What if nothing worked out.

The answer to this question is simply don't get discouraged or it might get better next time. All you can ask your students to think about it after the class where after the recitation. And then you can talk about it next time.

If this happens a lot, and don't take it as a sign that your students are against you maybe just a hard question that they need more time to think about it.

Okay, so here it comes to the last scenario, scenario three. The conversation is being dominated by one or two students. What are you going to do, again, time to pause and try to think, are you own.

And here are few things that I list.

Encourage others to join the conversation.

Ask for other perspectives.

Or you can change the structure of the discussion. So everyone has a chance to participate.

Again, the example here is more when we can physically walk around in the classroom.

But this is just something to keep in mind because similar issues will happen when you're teaching is done remotely and you have to kind of get prepared for these kind of scenarios.

In terms of what you do when these awkward silence happens. That puts an end to our session and here are some final thoughts. First of all, be prepared and be flexible. It's nice to always have an idea of what's going on in your classroom and be prepared for different questions that people may ask.

Whatever we know that 99% of time things don't go exactly as planned. So again, don't be discouraged if that's the case, and be flexible with all these unexpected changes.

Now, being able to answer a question in the early not going to make you look stupid or that TA. It's okay to get back to your students after class through email or addresses the next time your office hour

Be brave and confident you are a grad student at Caltech and you have a strong academic background so have some confidence in yourself.

Teaching is fun and try to enjoy this process as much as you can. It is a very special part of life that is almost exclusive to grad school.

There are also many resources available, such a CTLO, senior students and TA, the writing center, as well as professors staff.

Teaching virtually and remotely can be hard, but please feel free to reach out and everyone at Caltech right now is working hard to make things available and accessible to you, no matter where you are. Thank you for your time and hope you enjoyed this session.