

## EXPLORATIVE IDEAS ABOUT THE COMMUNICATIVE IDENTITY OF THE TEACHER

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**ABSTRACT:** *Is there a communicative identity of the teacher? What communicative elements do we develop to succeed and establish an excellent didactic relationship with the students? I tried a few answers using a technique I called contextual communicational description. The exploratory study carried out confirms the fact that the communicative identity of the teacher is built and negotiated continuously in the relationship with the students.*

**Keywords:** *teacher communicational identity; communicational description; student-teacher communication.*

The article tries to capture the teacher's communication style or communicative identity using a qualitative approach. For this, we used situational communication description, which involves making a "composition" about the communicative behavior of the teacher. This approach's justification lies in the undeniable importance that heteroidentifications (identifications made by others) have on the communicative dimension of the teacher's identity.

Talking about communication means evoking one of the most prolific discursive themes of the social sciences of recent times. Linguistics, psychology, sociology, economics are just some disciplines that consider communication a relevant topic for their concerns. Research in educational sociology is no exception and falls within the "fashionable" directions of analysis. However, beyond being a fad, the research of communication is supported by academic and experiential needs, namely, the need to be adequately understood and to move relatively "safely" in a network of social interactions, particularly in educational interactions.

This article's motivational resources are the principles enunciated by The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support

Consortium (INTASC), an American "educational consortium" consisting of state-level educational agencies, educational institutions, and organizations that aim to reform the educational system.

Although the activity of this Consortium is not directly linked to the university level through the complementarity of groups, the proposed principles concern the educational system. Thus, principle 6 postulates: The teacher uses verbal, nonverbal, and mediated communication (information technologies n.n.) to develop an interactive environment based on active research, collaboration, and supportive techniques.

The scientific literature is not poor regarding references about professional standards for teachers (Gliga, 2002). The core principles suggest that communicative skills are among a "good" teacher characteristics (Gliga, 2002; Palali, Van Elk, Bolhaar, & Rud, 2018; Christoforidou & Kyriakides, 2021).

From these concerns for establishing professional standards for teachers, one can identify the increased importance that must be given to the subject of didactic communication. This importance should materialize in applied research, not only in arid theoretical debates.

### **Some elements of a theoretical framework**

Communication, in the sense of educational or didactic communication, is well represented in the Romanian pedagogical literature, managing to capture whole pages from "classical" textbooks or studies (Cucoș, 1996; Șoitu, 1997a; Șoitu, 1997b; Iacob, 1998; Cristea 2000, Săucan 2002).

I do not want, in the following lines, to present a broad and multidimensional theoretical framework of educational communication. Still, I prefer to state an operational framework effective in the chosen investigative approach.

1. From the beginning, we must clarify the difference between educational communication and didactic communication. The first one is linked to the educational phenomenon in general, and didactic communication represents a particular form of communication, with clearly stated normative prescriptions (status-role prescriptions) attached to the act of formal learning.

2. The types of communication, in a sense used in this paper, are defined as follows: verbal communication consists of all messages transmitted orally or in writing. Verbal communication appears as a dynamic construction. The word represents the central aspect, but which becomes significant only in a specific communication context, which values the word in a certain way. Nonverbal communication is represented by those messages related to movement, gestures, facial expressions, the appearance of the actors involved in the communicative act. Paraverbal communication accompanies verbal communication through vocal elements attached and which sometimes transmit messages opposite to verbal ones. The characteristics of the voice, the peculiarities of pronunciation, the intensity of speech are essential paraverbal elements in the construction of communication.

3. The communication identity is outlined as an active dimension of the individual's identity. Although it can give rise to ambiguity, the notion of identity (without any other attribute) avoids another inefficient reporting, namely, individual/social reporting. Without analytically highlighting the relationship between personal identity and social identity, we can mention, paraphrasing Jenkins's (2000) words, that the angle of approach gives the significant difference between personal and social in the discussion about identity. When personal identity is invoked, we privilege difference concerning similarity, and when we speak of social identity, we consider similarity relative to difference more critical.

To analyze communication identity, we must consider its duality as axiomatic. For example, we can speak of identity for oneself and others (Ilut 2001; Dubar, 2003). Synthetically, the two dimensions refer to the image that the individual tries to promote in different situational contexts (individual or social).

### **Method**

Using a qualitative approach, the study aims to identify some characteristics that define the communicative identity of teachers.

For collecting the data, the situational communication description was used. That is a technique that involves the subjective description (synthetic or elaborated) of the communication behavior of the teacher during the classes.

Students from Sociology and Human Resources degrees made the descriptions relatively long (two weeks) to allow focused observation and accurate analysis of communication behavior. The students voluntarily accepted to collect the data (situational descriptions) during the first semester in the 2019-2020 academic year.

The study did not follow the analysis of a single teacher. Therefore, the students had

the freedom to choose based on the subjective criteria the teacher they will "describe".

On the other hand, not following the statistical coverage of the teachers' communication identity, were analyzed the "situational descriptions" made by 60 students. To fit within the limits of the deontology of sociological research, the students did not note any factual data of the described teacher.

The justification for using the situational communicative description, the expression of students' hetero-identifications on teachers, is found in Jenkins' words, "identity belongs rather to the other, to the one who gives it to you" (2000: 8).

## Results

The results of the analysis were structured according to the type of communication behavior described. Thus, were highlighted the descriptions of verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal behaviors that compose a communicational portrait of the teacher.

### (a). Verbal communication

Verbal communication is best represented in the descriptions made, perhaps because the verbal aspects are the easiest to identify and analyze. Following the content analysis of the communicational hetero-identifications of the teachers, the following elements emerged, presented in random order:

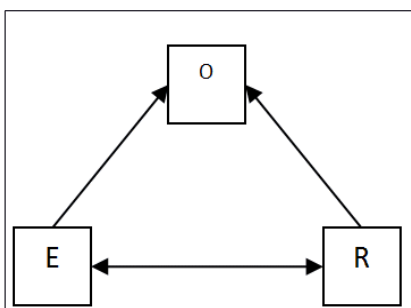


Fig.1. Modelul inițial Newcomb

**1. Removals from the subject of the course.** These forms of communication are necessary for content management for at least two reasons: 1) they are helpful elements by which new information is linked to already known content. By using "parentheses", the process of didactic communication proves to be natural. The didactic discourse is part of a continuum that develops along with the relationship between teacher and student, and 2) update and reinforce the information presented throughout the course. However, the extreme form, namely the excessive use of connections, "jumps from one idea to another without later returning to what started" (IA) and their branching (connections in connections), is not beneficial in the construction of effective teacher-student communication.

These "didactic parentheses" could be conceptualized by reference to an established communication model. A simple model of the communication process, which illustrates the systemic approach, is suggested by Newcomb (1953). It is based on the premise that communication between human individuals fulfills the essential function of allowing two or more interlocutors to maintain the simultaneous orientation towards each other and objects in the external environment. The model is a triangular one, the peaks of the triangle are represented by two individuals and by an object X from the shared environment (Fig.1).

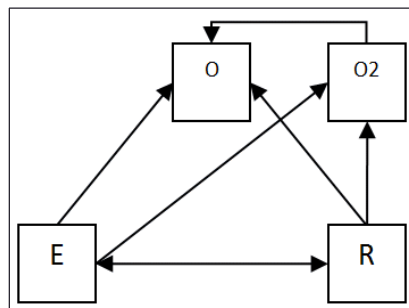


Fig.2. Modelul comunicării didactice

In the case of explanations on the educational message, when, to facilitate understanding, the teacher initiates various connections with "objects" already known to students who/which are not in the conceptual or factual sphere of the topic, the graphical representation of the model could change (Fig.2). "Teaching parentheses" are accepted and supported by students, who appreciate the explanations that value "facts outside the course" (ME)

**2. Subjective verbal elements.** Verbal tics can achieve a communicative distance between teacher and student "are annoying, tiring" (HV) or can be elements of closeness, which can differentiate between different teachers' discourses. By using these tics, the teacher stands out, thus bringing his students closer to his classes. However, the notion of "verbal tic" is often perceived as derogatory, and therefore, this differentiation is mainly negative. Also, in this area can be included the regionalisms. "It does not use elements of jargon, but regionalisms appear in the communication" placed "at the right time, increasing the charm of the conversation" (PML).

**3. Mediated / unmediated interactions.** Suppose you want to receive as accurately as possible the information transmitted during the course. In that case, you can use mediated verbal language, which is superior in clarity and systematization of explicit spoken language. The message dictated by "dictation" is more likely to reach students in the same form than the direct, immediate message. However, this way of conducting the course is negatively valued by students because it does not involve their co-participation. The communication relationship is one-way ("unbalanced" in favor of the teacher). On the other hand, the use of direct verbal communication without the help of auxiliary course materials (worksheets, notes, multimedia presentations, etc.) can lead to the appearance of "grammatical errors" (IA) justified to some extent by the relative spontaneity of language.

**4. The "discipline" of verbal communication.** Teacher-student communication is institutionally defined communication. Actors (teachers and students) know or expect to see the set of desirable communication behaviors specific to each role.

The first element identified in this category is the "distance" between the teacher and students. There are teachers who "[...] address us with you" (TD) or who "[...] (speak n.n.) sometimes in the second person singular, sometimes in the second person plural. This shows that it is not possible to decide in which category to place the student" (TI). It is essential that the "distance of respect" given by the pronoun of politeness be clearly "measurable." This distance, once established, plays a fundamental role in the communicative evolution of the didactic interaction.

Because the didactic discourse aims primarily at understanding (at the level of the receiver) those transmitted, the teacher's communication is conditioned by this axiomatic aspect. On the other hand, the student must adopt the role of "the formed one," which limits to a certain extent the communicative manifestation, "[...] (about the teacher) she does not like to be interrupted" (PML). The example does not directly reveal the communicative limitation of the student in the relationship with the teacher. Still, it is somewhat related to an ethic of communication, to an implicit discipline that the interacting actors must assume. However, the mentioned example attributes the communicative initiative of the teacher. Sometimes this advantage is not used as such, turning communication into "[...] rigid expression, which takes the form of a learned monologue" (BUR), "[...] addressing students is achieved through a series of phrases [...], through a true discourse that gives the impression of a lesson learned by heart" (TM) or more, can be exaggerated in the sense that "[...] goes directly to the subject of the course, without even announce the title" (BR).

The use of jokes (colloquial register) in the didactic interaction has the role of disconnecting the students' attention from the course subject and relaxing the atmosphere. Likewise, the decision to use the "didactic joke" belongs to the teacher, who may or may not allow a "relaxation" of a few minutes during the class.

Another aspect that subsumes the "communication discipline" is the use of feedback. An "obligation" of the teacher, this time, is to receive intermediate / partial feedback, which needs to be done systematically to identify possible syncopes in understanding the educational message. At the same time, feedback positively values communication within the course hours that thus become interactive "... constantly checks whether its message has been received at the desired level or if it has been received correctly" (FI).

**5. Complexity of style.** The complexity of the style used by the teacher is another index that must be considered when referring to didactic communication. It is assumed that the university level conditions the language used in the course/seminar in the sense that it must have high complexity, with many intricate and well-chosen neologisms and constructions. All these are conditioned by the elevated level of the students (year of study). Those in the third year are at a different level of internalization of the specialized language (which provides the specific terminology) than those in the first year, which are taken somewhat unprepared, having only the vocabulary acquired up to high school. Another aspect that conditions the complexity of language is the discipline itself that includes that language. From this point of view, there are heavier and some lighter domains.

From the above, the teacher must prove the ability to adapt the style according to the "level of understanding of students" (SA). The variation of the complexity of the message is a communication feature imperative to teachers. The teacher must be

a filter of information and a "translator" of it to the level of understanding at which students are.

The "hyper-elevated" language, the unjustified use of the general academic jargon or of the discipline that the teacher teaches, can constitute a communicative shortcoming, challenging to overcome, "[...] communication with students being very difficult realized" (TC).

### **(b) Nonverbal communication**

Although through nonverbal communication, information is transmitted as consistently as through verbal communication (primarily related to the sender's emotional state) in the communicative descriptions, the nonverbal was valued inferior to the verbal. Thus, the following aspects were reached:

**1. Gesture.** The analysis results lead to the difference between permanent gestures, which is an integral part of the communicative manner of the teacher, "which tires us and distracts us from the subject" (BB), and occasional, which is used at certain times when the verbal message needs to be gesturally supported (a basic idea, a controversial topic, etc.), "when speaking to students about an important point in the lesson," or "Hand gestures are appropriate to the things he says" (GC).

Broad gestures involve the risk of switching attention from the ideational dynamics to the dynamics of the teacher's body. As some of those who have made the descriptions suggest, if they are too frequent or exaggerated, they can "arouse hilarity" (IP). Aggressive gestures such as holding hands on the hips or pointing the finger at students should be avoided if the teacher aims positive communication.

For the students, there are also repetitive gestural behaviors that are not directly related to the teaching profession. Some examples are passing the hand through the hair, "playing" with rings/wedding rings, "breaking" the hands, and which are

associated with hypermotivity or some insecurity.

**2. The look.** It is an integral part of nonverbal language. It is also the way to keep connected teachers and students. The fact that the look is not directed at the students can induce the feeling of frustration which, further, can turn into a disinterest for the respective course. The look becomes an instrument through which the teacher supports the communication because sometimes the students need this visual confirmation. "[...] he usually fixes his gaze on some people" (TD), "[...] he has his gaze fixed on the students who nod in the first bench" (SC). "Eye contact is rare, but when it is done: support and positive communication" (CPD).

On the other hand, the teacher seeks to communicate nonverbally (the gaze) with people who confirm his understanding of the message or show a high interest in the subject presented.

**3. Clothing.** Clothing is analyzed using a stereotype (not necessarily negative) that "defines" the desirable, accepted didactic clothing, "the clothing is typical of a teacher [...] two-piece suit [...] dark in color" (DDM).

Thus, the suit, the jacket, the tailor are clothing items "[...] that require respect from students because they suggest a distinguished attitude" (AI).

Many of the considered descriptions capture the role that clothing plays in the overall didactic communication "sober clothing style [...] somewhat imposes its authority in front of students" (MA) or "[...] (clothing n.n) suggests the authority of the teacher" (BR).

In addition to clothing, jewelry can "communicate" social status and define the communication framework. The ostentatious wearing of these accessories contradicts the sobriety attached to the teaching profession, "often exposes a lot of expensive jewelry" (MI), and can negatively condition the communication relationship.

**4. Physical mobility.** In relation to the physical mobility of the teacher, the following can be distinguished: (a) low or non-existent mobility, "[...] always sits on the chair", "the chair offers extra safety (to the teacher n.n)" (VA) or "he is always behind the desk" (SAM); (b) situational mobility, "stands among students when teaching" (BNA), "[...] stands and walks very little" (LA), "[...] supported by the desk or by a sill" (BNA), "moves only to the board to write down the main ideas and between the student desks to present the cover of a volume" (HF); (c) high mobility, "[...] the teacher is used to being close to students, walking through the class" (DA), "gestures are dynamic, agitated, completing the discussion ..." (SM), "[...] very active, walks among students, interacts with them" (SM), "[...] the teacher walks through the class, between desks and board. He never sits on the chair" (AI) or "[...] most of the time he walks through the amphitheater while talking and never stays still" (BR).

#### (c) Paraverbal communication

The importance of paraverbal aspects in communication was emphasized by a "statistic" of communication by Mehrabian (1981). Thus, 5% of the content of the message is transmitted verbally, 38% is transmitted through paraverbal details, and the rest (55%) is "communicated" through facial expression (nonverbal dimension). This communicative formula is one of the most used references that denotes the quantitative relationship between the three aspects (verbal / paraverbal / nonverbal).

One of the paraverbal elements easy to notice, but at the same time with a strong influence, is the tone.

The tone used contributes to building the relationship between teacher and students. A warm, pleasant tone suggests confidence and support. Instead, an authoritarian style denotes harshness, harshness, impersonality.

At the level of the receiver can be identified various explanations of the tone:

**1. The use of authoritarian tone:** "[...] (professor n.n) feels that he could lose his authority in front of us" (VA), "[...] serious tone of voice" (MA), "[...] emphasizes by repeating or raising the tone of the voice certain elements that seem important" (BC), "[...] a high intonation accentuates the essential ideas of the course" (RR) or "the tone that it does not allow you to stay relaxed" (BR).

**2. The use of a low tone:** "the low tone and the trembling voice betray a certain insecurity, highlighting a sensitive person" (OE)

Another aspect identified in the communication descriptions was the verbal flow, which, when reduced, can generate "a state of fatigue" (AI) and "boredom" (AI). When it is "abundant", it is difficult to follow and favors inattention.

Although theoretically, the paraverbal and nonverbal dimensions "cover" about 93% (Mehrabian 1981) of the meaning of the message and, naturally, it would clearly "dominate" the perception of the receiver through the situational communication description. We can observe a "diversion of normal". Thus, in the "didactic situation", verbal behavior is best represented.

## Conclusions

The conclusions of the study can be structured on the following coordinates:

1. The didactic discourse, more the didactic communication, constitutes a complex reality, being conditioned by the

psychosocial and physical characteristics of the teacher, by the complexity of the message (nature of the discipline, topic, language), and by the group and/or individual character of the students.

2. Observing the analysis results, we cannot admit the hypothesis of the uniqueness of the communicative identity of the teachers. Moreover, in opposition to this essentialist idea (identity as immutable reality), the communicative identity is defined contextually based, naturally, on biological conditioning.

3. The diversity of points of view captured in the students' descriptions lead to the conclusion that, from a communicative perspective, there are no recipes that ensure didactic success and, therefore, there is no "desirable" communicative identity. Teachers must not refuse careful self-monitoring to correct any weaknesses (defined in context) and enhance the strengths in the construction and management of the teaching communication framework.

4. Through the action of the whole communication "arsenal" (verbal/nonverbal/paraverbal) the teacher has the following alternatives (a) to isolate himself, to act in such a way that the relationship is defined unidirectionally (teacher-student): authoritarian tone, superior attitude, inflexibility; or (b) to establish a connection, to negotiate the communication relationship, to consider the student a real dialogue partner: feedback, engaging in the subject, explanation of the topic.

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