



## **Ethos and Pedagogical Communication: Suggestions for Enhancing Credibility in the Classroom**

William A. Haskins  
McKendree College

Whether at the conscious or unconscious level, a student's perception of the teacher's *ethos*, or speaker's character, has an important impact on how he or she will react to the teacher and how effective the teacher will be in the classroom. Erosion of a teacher's *ethos* can quickly spell disaster in the classroom. This article looks at the critical relationship between *ethos* and pedagogical communication. The analysis will explore the definition of *ethos*, its various dimensions, and suggestions for improving it in the classroom.

It was John's first day as a new science teacher at a middle school in Illinois. He dreamed of this day; he grew anxious at the thought of how his students would respond to him. Would they like him? Would they respect him and his knowledge? Would they trust him enough to feel comfortable in asking him questions or confiding in him?

The questions that John raised are related to one of the main traits teachers must demonstrate in the classroom: *ethos*. As with any teacher, John needs to be perceived as having high *ethos* (i.e., one's character or credibility) in the eyes of his students. *Ethos*, then, is the perceived degree of character or credibility that a person believes exists in another person or object. How John helps to develop his *ethos*, or credibility, in the minds of his students will play a significant role in his success as a teacher.

Today's teachers face a variety of reactions from their students and other constituencies: from simple praise to national awards, from insults to dismissal, from pushing and shoving to physical violence. No matter what the reaction, at the core of the response is the person's perception of the teacher's credibility.

Whether at the conscious or unconscious level, the individual's perception of the teacher's

credibility has a tremendous impact on both how he or she reacts to the teacher and on how effective the teacher will be as an educator and communicator (Frymier & Thompson, 1992). Erosion of a teacher's credibility can quickly spell disaster in the classroom; worse yet, violence may quickly erupt in a climate where the student has little respect for the credibility of teachers or other individuals.

But to develop one's *ethos*, a teacher must communicate effectively with his or her students in the classroom (Frymier & Thompson, 1992). Part of the teacher's pedagogy must exhibit itself through a pedagogical communication process that helps the teacher to be perceived as credible by the students (McCrosky & Richmond, 1992; Nussbaum, 1992). For purposes of this paper, pedagogical communication is defined as *a process of communication used by teachers to advance educational subject matter*. Such behaviors as vocal variation (e.g., changes in rate, inflection, volume, movement) or visual variation (e.g., change in facial expressions, eye contact, gestures) teachers use to help communicate subject matter are examples of pedagogical communication. And more, research suggests that these behaviors may increase students' cognitive and affective learning (Gorham,

1988; Richmond, Gorhan, & McCrosky, 1987). This article looks at the critical relationship between *ethos* and pedagogical communication. The analysis will explore the definition of *ethos*, its various dimensions, and suggestions for improving it in the classroom.

### Definition of Ethos

The concept of *ethos* received considerable attention from the ancient Greeks, especially by the great philosopher and teacher, Aristotle. In his work *The Rhetoric*, he stated:

The character [*ethos*] of the speaker is a cause of persuasion when the speech is so uttered as to make him worthy of belief; for as a rule we trust men of probity more, and more quickly, about things in general, while on points outside the realm of exact knowledge, where opinion is divided, we trust them absolutely (Aristotle, 1960, p. 9).

Additionally, he claimed that the speaker's "character [*ethos*] is the most potent of all the means of persuasion" (p. 9). More contemporary scholars view *ethos* as primarily the perception of credibility one has towards a communicator or his or her message or both (Hamilton, 1998; Johnson & Coolen, 1995; Booth-Butterfield & Gutowski, 1993; Burgoon, Birk & Pfau, 1990). Such scholars frequently use the term *source credibility* to describe the perception audience members have of a speaker's credibility (Trenholm, 1989). A speaker, for instance, may be extremely knowledgeable in a certain subject area, but if audience members fail to perceive the speaker as knowledgeable, the speaker's level of expertise will not enhance his or her credibility (Redmond, 2000). Likewise, the speaker may view himself or herself as being honest and a person of good character. However, if the audience doubts this, the speaker's credibility diminishes in their minds (Redmond, 2000). Clearly, what becomes critical in this dynamic communication exchange between a speaker and the audience is the audience's perception of the speaker's traits and ultimate judgment of the *source's credibility* (Trenholm, 1989).

As stated earlier, *ethos* is defined as *the perceived degree of character or credibility that a person believes exists in another person or object*. Stated differently, how much trust and belief one has in a communicator or in his or her message or both will have an important bearing on how persuasive the communicator will be in the mind of the listener. For teachers, then, their credibility can play a significant part in how effective they will be in the classroom.

### Suggestions for Improving Ethos and its Dimensions through Pedagogical Communication

Before starting with suggestions, one needs to realize that a communicator's *ethos* does not occur

in isolation from other important factors occurring in the environment. This is particularly true with the classroom environment. Factors such as "timing, context, content, and student ability" (Nussabaum, 1992, p. 179), can quickly affect a teacher's *ethos* in ways not predicted. With this in mind, the following dimensions, suggestions and examples for improving a teacher's credibility through his or her pedagogical communication are presented.

The topic of credibility, has received significant attention in the fields of communication and psychology (Hamilton, 1998; Johnston & Coolen, 1995; Larson, 1992; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Berlo, 1961). Variables that have emerged as salient factors of credibility are trust, competence, and dynamism (McCrosky & Young, 1981). A more recent factor receiving notice by scholars is that of teacher immediacy, which "refers to the use of communication behaviors [e.g., movement, enthusiasm, use of gestures, humor, vocal variety] that reduce both the psychological and physical distance between two individuals" (Myers, Zhong, & Guan, 1998). Teacher immediacy has been found to be an important variable for influencing teachers' effectiveness and for helping students to diminish their apprehension in the classroom (McCrosky & Richmond, 1992).

The first dimension explored is trust. Trust appears in many communication relationships between friends, family members, doctors and patients—and especially between teachers and students. Verderber and Verderber (1995) define trust as "placing confidence in the other" (p. 143). Clearly, in a classroom, both student and teacher need to operate in a climate of trust where each can place confidence in the other, as is the case when a student elects to confide in a teacher. The student may trust the teacher to refrain from disclosing particular information or may trust the teacher to provide sound guidance on personal or academic matters, for instance. Trust must be earned through the pedagogical communication process that teachers display with their students. Any violation of this trust can potentially rupture the professional relationship that teachers need to maintain if honest dialogues are to occur.

Suggestions for improving trust through pedagogical communication include:

1. adapting messages to listeners by being genuinely sincere and honest in the presentation of information (Haskins & Staudacher, 1987),
2. identifying strengths and weaknesses in information (e.g., reliability, biases) to demonstrate the speaker's honesty in presenting messages (Larson, 1992),

## Ethos and Pedagogical Communication: Suggestions for Enhancing Credibility in the Classroom

3. introducing sources (which may be trusted by students) used to develop class material (Lucas, 1998),
4. explaining the soundness of the analysis, arguments, and evidence that can help to reinforce trust between teacher and student (Haskins & Staudacher, 1987), and
5. earning trust by showing trust towards students in the educational process (Haskins & Staudacher, 1987).

When presenting messages, teachers, then, may want to tailor their messages to relate to the level of understanding of their students. This needs to be done in ways that convey sincerity and honesty. For example, a teacher should not be afraid to say "I don't know" if he or she lacks information asked by a student. That in itself is an honest answer. Certainly an "educated guess" or a response that suggests a willingness to seek out such information can further enhance a teacher's sincerity and honesty. Whenever possible, teachers need to point out the strengths or weaknesses that exist in their messages and sources and why they exist. This may further enhance trust between teachers and students in the believability of teachers' messages. Additionally, teachers need to encourage active learning by inviting students to engage in dialogues with them on issues related to class topics. Students can learn from these types of exchanges to evaluate messages and sources for honesty and accuracy.

The next dimension of *ethos* discussed is competence. But competence involves more than simply being knowledgeable. It involves a perception that others have of people concerning their degree of knowledge on topics, abilities to command such knowledge, and abilities to communicate this knowledge clearly. Teachers constantly face being evaluated and tested by others, especially by students, concerning their level of knowledge on a variety of subjects. Moreover, a teacher's command of the subject, as well as how he or she communicates this information, bears heavily on a student's perception of the teacher's competence.

Being perceived as competent communicators by students holds the potential for significant advantages (e.g., student interest, participation) for teachers. But, again, being perceived as competent means more than being perceived as intelligent. With this dimension of *ethos*, then, a teacher needs to demonstrate an excellent command of the subject matter.

Unless otherwise noted, the suggestions come from the author's personal educational experiences. Suggestions for doing this through pedagogical communication include:

1. appearing highly organized in the presentation of subject matter (Lucas, 1998),
2. delivering the message as free as possible of errors (e.g., grammar, pronunciation, enunciation) while maintaining strong eye contact with students (Kearney & Plax, 1999),
3. preparing thoroughly for class by being in control of the subject matter, key issues, sources, evidence, arguments or differing viewpoints on the subject (Brydon & Scott, 2000),
4. having lesson plans that are organized and detailed which can help teachers gain greater confidence and control of their subjects, and
5. using relevant personal experiences that can provide greater insights for students on the subject.

Teachers want their students to view them as being competent instructors. Preparation is the key for establishing an organized, well developed message. For instance, the lesson plan needs to contain sound evidence, arguments, and current material that can gain and hold the attention of students. Teachers can practice presenting their messages to allow for greater command of the subject and familiarity with their delivery of it. When appropriate, teachers should let their feelings help demonstrate both their interests as well as command of the topic. And more, if teachers feel uniquely qualified to address the subject (e.g., special training, awards earned), they can alert their students to these qualifications. For example, teachers may suggest that in high school or college they won awards in their fields of study. Teachers must be careful not to brag, but to present this information as additional facts which help underscore their competency on specific subjects.

A third dimension of *ethos* focuses on dynamism (Lemert, 1963; Berlo, 1961). Simply put, this "is the degree to which the audience admires and identifies with the source's attractiveness, power or forcefulness, and energy" (Larson, 1992, p. 226). This dimension correlates strongly to a person's level of charisma. Certain teachers, for example, may exhibit a high level of energy in their presentations; they may display "a flair for the dramatic" that moves and excites listeners. Dynamism, however, does not necessarily mean that a teacher must always display a high level of energy. As Larson (1992) explains: "Dynamic speakers don't necessarily move about or wave their arms to give off dynamism cues. They just seem to take up a lot of psychological space. They enter a room and people expect them to be in charge" (p. 226). Dynamic speakers appear to be in charge of

the situation. People expect them to know what their discussing and to lead them in the discussion.

In the classroom, teachers need to appear not only in control of their environment but energized by it. To look bored or distant invites communication disaster. Such impressions can quickly evaporate any feelings of excitement students have for their teachers or class content. Some thoughts for enhancing classroom dynamism through pedagogical communication include:

1. developing a powerful style of speaking that uses few verbal or vocal hesitations, such as "okay" or "you know" (Hostman, 1989),
2. varying physical movements (e.g., gestures, meaningful movement, facial expressions, eye contact) to complement the message and to avoid a monotonous communication style (Redmond, 2000),
3. varying vocal characteristics (e.g., rate, pitch, inflection, tone) to add to the variety and interest of the delivery (Redmond, 2000), and
4. using a variety of evidence, stories, visual aids, computer programs, powerpoint, etc. that add interest to the teacher's message (Larson, 1992).

Flexibility in both visual and vocal aspects of pedagogical communication becomes critical for enhancing dynamism. A less dynamic pedagogical communication style risks making both instructor and course content appear boring to students. To increase dynamism, for example, teachers can use a powerful speaking style to express their thoughts by reducing "ahs," "ums," or "okays." Additionally, teachers can videotape a practice presentation of one of their lessons. They can critique how they sound and look. They can tape themselves again, but this time allowing for some flexibility in their voice, movement, or use of visual aids. They can also let others critique them in this process. Such exercises can help teachers to develop a more confident, dynamic pedagogical communication style, allowing for the possibility of enhancing their credibility in the minds of students.

The last dimension of *ethos* for examination involves the teacher's immediacy behavior. Utilizing some of the traits of dynamism, such as physical movement, eye contact, etc., immediate behavior suggests that a teacher uses a more direct style of teaching. That is, the teacher displays behaviors that reduce physical and psychological distance between himself or herself and the student. Kelly and Gorham (1988) operationalize high immediacy as "the teacher . . . sitting on the edge of the chair, leaning forward, placing nothing between himself and the subject, and utilizing head nods" (p. 203). Richmond, Gorham,

and McCrosky (1987) further suggest that such behavior may also include "[v]ocal expressiveness, smiling at the class, and having a relaxed body position" and that these last three behaviors appear to be the "most important" for predicting student learning in the classroom (pp. 586-587).

The following suggestions for improving immediacy of behavior through pedagogical communication include:

1. allowing for a relaxed body position when presenting material by looking comfortable when standing or sitting in front of the class (McCrosky & Richmond, 1992),
2. establishing eye contact with the entire class by periodically scanning the entire class (McCrosky & Richmond, 1992),
3. smiling to disarm and relax students (Frymier & Thompson, 1992; McCrosky & Richmond, 1992),
4. attempting to reduce distance, when possible, between teachers and students by moving or moving away from barriers (e.g., desk, podiums) that often separate teachers from students (Frymier & Thompson, 1992; McCrosky & Richmond, 1992), and
5. allowing verbal expressiveness to help establish immediacy in teachers' behaviors by attracting the attention of students and by reducing the psychological distance between teachers and students (McCrosky & Richmond, 1992; Gorham, 1988).

Teachers can improve their use of immediacy of behavior with their students. For instance, teachers can practice this type of behavior with friends and colleagues. They can reduce their distance to a comfortable zone when communicating with them. Teachers can then transfer this type of behavior, if they believe it appropriate, to the classroom. In the classroom, teachers need to remember to maintain good eye contact, smile periodically as they address their students, and maintain a relaxed body position when sitting or standing. At times, teachers, for example, may wish to bring their chairs closer to students or reposition students' desks (e.g., in the form of a circle or semicircle), helping to reduce both psychological and physical distance between themselves and their students. Teachers need to move comfortably and meaningfully in the classroom, pausing periodically to maintain eye contact with their students. These examples of immediate behavior can not only help to reduce distance between teachers and students but possibly increase greater cognitive and affective learning by students (Gorham, 1988; Richmond, Gorham, & McCrosky, 1987).

### Summary

A critical key to teaching effectiveness focuses on the concept of *ethos*. How educators develop their credibility through pedagogical communication may greatly influence the perceptions of students toward teachers' abilities in particular and the learning process in general. This article has provided a working definition of *ethos as the perceived degree of character or credibility that a person believes exists in another person or object*.

Definitions for pedagogical communication and immediate behavior were also provided. Practical suggestions for improving *ethos* and its related dimensions through pedagogical communication were given. Finally, examples were provided for applying the suggestions that may help teachers to improve their credibility in the classroom.

No form of pedagogical communication can ever substitute for preparation and knowledge of a subject. A teacher's credibility, must be earned in the classroom. Allowing for the union of pedagogical communication and *ethos*, then, may help teachers be perceived by their students as being more competent, dynamic communicators in the classroom.

### References

- Aristotle. (1960). *The rhetoric of Aristotle* (L. Cooper, Tran.). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.
- Berlo, D. K. (1961). *An empirical test of general construct of credibility*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Association of America, New York.
- Booth-Butterfield, S., & Gutowski, C. (1993). Message modality and source credibility can interact to affect argument process. *Communication Quarterly*, 41, 77-89.
- Brydon, S. R., & Scott, M. D. (2000). *Between one and many: The art and science of public speaking* (3rd ed.). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.
- Burgoon, J., Birk, T., & Pfau, M. (1990). Nonverbal behaviors, persuasion, and credibility. *Human Communication Research*, 17, 140-169.
- Frymier, A. B. (1994). The use of affinity-seeking in producing liking and learning in the classroom. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 22, 87-105.
- Frymier, A. B., & Thompson, C. A. (1992). Perceived teacher affinity-seeking in relation to perceive teacher credibility. *Communication Education*, 41, 388-399.
- Gorham, J. (1988). The relationship between verbal teacher immediacy and student learning. *Communication Education*, 37, 40-53.
- Hamilton, M. A. (1998). Message variables that mediate and moderate the effect of equivocal language on source credibility. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 109-143.
- Haskins, W. A., & Staudacher, J. M. (1987). *Successful public speaking: A practical guide*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co.
- Hostman, L. (1989). The evaluative consequences of hedges, hesitations, and intensifiers: Powerful and powerless speech styles. *Human Communication Research*, 15, 383-406.
- Johnston, L., & Coolen, P. (1995). A dual processing approach to stereotype change. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 660-673.
- Kearney, P., & Plax, T. G. (1999). *Public speaking in a diverse society* (2nd ed.). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.
- Kelly, D. H., & Gorham, J. (1988). Effects of immediacy on recall information. *Communication Education*, 37, 198-207.
- Larson, C. U. (1992). *Persuasion: Reception and responsibility* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.
- Lemert, J. B. (1963, August). *Dimensions of source credibility*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Education in Journalism.
- Lucas, S. E. (1998). *The art of public speaking* (6th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- McCrosky, J., & Richmond, V. P. (1992). Increasing teacher influence through immediacy. In V. P. Richmond & J. C. McCrosky (Eds.) *Power in the classroom: Communication, control, and concern*, 45, 200-211.
- McCrosky, J., & Young, T. (1981). Ethos and credibility: The construct and its measurements after two decades. *Central States Speech Journal*, 32, 24-34.
- Myers, S. A., Zhong, M., & Guan, S. (1998). Instructor immediacy in the Chinese college classroom. *Communication Studies*, 49, 240-254.
- Nussbaum, J. F. (1992). Effective teacher behavior. *Communication Education*, 41, 167-180.
- Redmond, M. V. (2000). *Communication: Theories and application*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Richmond, V. P. Gorham, J. S., & McCrosky, J. (1987). The relationship between selected immediacy behaviors and cognitive learning. In M. McLaughlin (Ed.),

- Communication Yearbook 10* (pp. 574-590). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Trenholm, S. (1989). *Persuasion and social influence*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Verderber, R. F., & Verderber, H. S. (1995). *Interact: Using interpersonal communication skills* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

**2000 Article Citation**

Haskins, W. (2000, March 3). Ethos and pedagogical communication: Suggestions for enhancing credibility in the classroom. *Current Issues in Education* [On-line], 3(4). Available: <http://cie.ed.asu.edu/volume3/number4/>.

**Author Notes**

William A. Haskins  
McKendree College  
Lebanon, IL 62254  
[whaskins@atlas.mckendree.edu](mailto:whaskins@atlas.mckendree.edu)

William A. Haskins is a professor of communication at McKendree College. He has published numerous articles in journals of communication, law, engineering, religion and education. He is co-author of the book entitled *Successful Public Speaking: A Practical Guide*.

---

**Note from the 2015 Executive Editor, Constantin Schreiber**

**May 25, 2015.** This article was first published at the original *Current Issues in Education* website, located at <http://cie.asu.edu/articles/index.html>. In 2009, *CIE* changed online platforms to deliver the journal at <http://cie.asu.edu>. The original *CIE* website was from then on only used as an archival repository for published articles prior to Volume 12. After the new *CIE* website moved to a different server in 2014, the original website and original article URLs could not be accessed anymore. Therefore, this article had to be repurposed into the published format you are viewing now.

All content from the original publication has been preserved. No content edits occurred. Spelling, grammar, and mechanical errors that may be found were present in the original publication. The *CIE* logo and publisher information in use at the time of the article's original publication is unaltered. Please direct questions about this article's repurposing to [cie@asu.edu](mailto:cie@asu.edu).

---

**2015 Article Citation**

Haskins, W. (2000). Ethos and pedagogical communication: Suggestions for enhancing credibility in the classroom. *Current Issues in Education*, 3(4). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/1616>

---



**Current Issues in Education**

---

Mary Lou Fulton College of Education  
Arizona State University