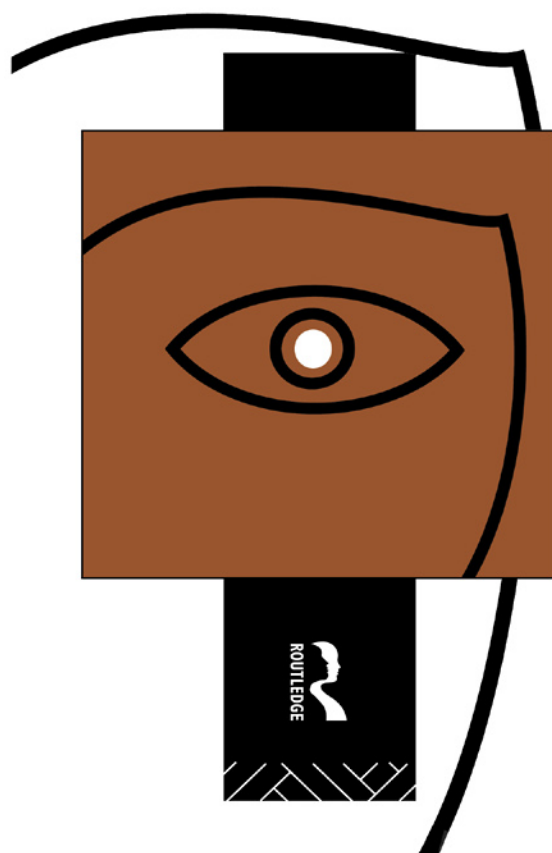


BODY LANGUAGE FOR COMPETENT TEACHERS



Sean Neill and Chris Caswell

**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

Body Language for Competent Teachers

Nonverbal skills are invaluable for teachers in ‘getting the message across’ to classes and understanding the messages pupils are sending—messages of interest or messages of confrontation, which are first expressed non-verbally. With increasing interest in classroom competence, teachers need to understand the use of gesture, posture, facial expression and tone of voice. These have become especially important for effective teachers in a climate where respect has to be earned rather than coming automatically with the job.

Each chapter of the book has training exercises related to its theme for the new teacher; answers are provided at the end of each chapter. The last chapter is addressed to staff responsible for staff training and development, especially in the school context, and includes suggestions for half- and whole-day courses.

Sean Neill has been carrying out research on non-verbal communication at the University of Warwick over the last ten years, and has taught, and published numerous research papers and an academic book, *Classroom Nonverbal Communication*.

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For our children
Clare, Richard, Riki, Rupert, Samantha and Suzannah
and their teachers
Celia and Liz

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General note

We have generally referred to the teacher as 'you' in the text; for clarity we refer to individual children as 'he' and teachers as 'she', except when dealing with particular individuals or the small amount of behaviour specific to one sex. In the great majority of cases, teacher and pupil behaviour relates to their roles irrespective of sex.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is little research evidence in the United Kingdom on ethnic differences in classroom non-verbal communication. Unshaded line drawings have been used for clarity, including in illustrations based on photographs or recordings of blacks. To preserve anonymity, sex and appearance have been changed, except where they are critical to the points made from an illustration.

Preface—who this book is for

This book is intended for new classroom teachers, including licensed and articulated teachers, and those who advise and train them. The section on initial encounters with groups will be valuable to many others who have the same need as teachers to show authority, such as youth group workers and playground supervisors. Workers with adults and youth trainers, as well as teachers, have to arouse the interest of their listeners and communicate interest in them and their efforts. Many of the techniques are also valuable to those dealing with groups of adults—though hopefully they will not need our advice on dealing with disruption. We have addressed the main text to ‘you’ as the inexperienced practitioner.

Each section of the book includes exercises which readers can use on a self-instructional basis. At the end of the book we include guidance for people running courses for colleagues, especially on how they can phase the exercises and on collecting and using material for more advanced work in in-service and initial courses. Some techniques, such as videotaping course participants, are potentially challenging and distressing for those involved, especially those who are already having difficulties and who could potentially benefit most from such a course. As a course leader you must therefore tread carefully. Our advice on course arrangement is based on experience of what engages the interest and involvement of participants, without stressing them unduly. We can’t guarantee that this will work in *your* situation, but it should!

Our ideas and conclusions are based on research evidence as well as practical experience. Much of the original research is published in academic journals which are only available in specialist libraries, but there are several books available (including Sean Neill’s *Classroom Nonverbal Communication*) which give more detailed surveys of this research. If you want to follow up a particular point, the books listed under ‘Further Reading’ have full reference lists which will allow you to follow up topics in more detail. Except in a few cases where a topic is only covered in journal articles (for example, the assessments of what kinds of training course on classroom non-verbal research work, covered in Chapter 10) we refer as far as possible to books which are fairly readily available.

TRAINING—AND SELF-TRAINING—MATERIALS

At the end of each chapter we include exercises and discussion topics. So why put exercises in this book? Well, they are there for three reasons. Firstly they should help you to clarify some of the issues that we raise during the chapters by applying them to a specific set of images or circumstances—a sort of ‘test yourself’ exercise! The value of active learning applies in this area too. Secondly, they will allow you to apply your existing knowledge (and there will be a lot of it!) to given situations, thereby

accentuating the principle that teachers can and do use non-verbal strategies as part of their coping armoury. Thirdly, they should allow you to define and develop strategies on an accumulating basis, by applying what you have learned so far to easily understood and recognisable situations. Simply stated, the exercises should, collectively, help you to develop your knowledge and understanding of non-verbal communication and suggest how you can apply it to actual classroom situations.

In order to achieve this our exercises follow two distinct formats—pictorial and descriptive—each requiring a different response from you.

Firstly, there are ‘Pictorial Exercises’: ‘What are these images saying?’ Here we have used drawings to illustrate particular non-verbal signals or patterns of behaviour.

Each chapter will have a number of these exercises, requiring you to provide your own definitions as to what is probably happening, or what you think the image is saying. To help, we have provided our own definition or explanation for each exercise at the end of the chapter (working, of course, from the privileged position of knowing the situation from whence the images were taken!).

You should not be unduly concerned if your explanations vary slightly from ours, as images taken out of context can be ambiguous and misleading. Indeed, this is precisely the point we shall make repeatedly about how non-verbal signals are used: their ambiguity allows messages to be conveyed without either sender or receiver having to acknowledge them explicitly. This is most obvious when pupils want to be disruptive without overtly challenging you, or when you use ironic non-verbal signals to qualify an apparently innocuous verbal statement; but non-verbal signals can also have a more positive value. You can convey enthusiasm or praise non-verbally to pupils, who might reject it, if you gave it verbally, because of pressures from their peers.

The real value of these pictorial exercises lies in the process of attempting to define the meaning behind them and, by doing so, becoming more familiar with the potential of such signals. We hope to encourage you to watch your class in a more specific and structured way and to develop, over a period of time, a sort of ‘thesaurus’ or index of behaviours from which you will be able to predict more accurately the intention of the individuals within your class.

Secondly, there are ‘Descriptive Exercises’: ‘What are these situations saying?’ Here we are exploring non-verbal features in actual classroom situations (taken from our own experience) where even a series of drawn images would be unable to convey the full nature and complexity of the problem. We hope that the circumstances described in these exercises will be reasonably familiar to you, but if not, it is perfectly acceptable, indeed desirable, for you to modify the situations to fit individuals and circumstances known to and remembered by you from your teaching career, training or even from your own school-days!

Within these situations you are asked to consider what the non-verbal dimensions may be; what you can recognise and what is probably being conveyed. Again, we hope to encourage you to focus on those non-verbal behaviours that you already recognise and use, albeit often subconsciously, and to become more aware of those strategies and behaviours that form part of your pupils’ repertoire.

These descriptive exercises may be particularly useful when used as part of group or pair situations, where you will be able to share ideas and may be more inclined to role-

play or mimic particular stances or gestures. It takes courage to do this, but it is the quickest way of reminding yourself just how powerful non-verbal communication can be.

Where appropriate, many chapters will include comments on a number of common concerns associated with the chapter content. These will be set out in such a way as to outline the concern and suggest possible solutions. Of course there will be readers who will say, 'Well that won't work here!', or, 'What, with my class? They must be joking!' Clearly, any solution must suit the circumstances in which it is to apply (we explore this point more fully in the next section); we are acutely aware of the limitations of providing such 'words of wisdom'. However, finding a beginning may be half the solution and our thoughts may serve to trigger a reaction or discussion, which you and your colleagues can tailor to fit your own circumstances.

The exercises throughout the book are there to assist in your understanding of the concepts under discussion, but don't let them become intimidating. For many readers it may be sufficient simply to read through, and perhaps come back to the exercises later. Some may feel that the exercises (especially the 'Descriptive Exercises') are better suited to a whole-school INSET topic, where teachers have the opportunity to discuss the exercises, pooling their thoughts and experience. Whatever your response is, it should be remembered that no exercise, no matter how intricate or cleverly constructed, can replace the 'real life' experience that it is attempting to replicate. Your experiences are as valid as any, and your knowledge of non-verbal communication probably far more advanced than you have realised. If we can help you to focus your knowledge in such a way as to allow you to maintain an effective working relationship with and between the pupils in your charge, and still come away with some loose change in the sanity purse, we shall be pleased.

WILL IT WORK?

The training materials raise the question, 'Will it work?' To this the answer must be 'Usually'. Perhaps a little more detail, and a more theoretical approach to what we mean by 'usually', will help.

Forecasting what will work in a classroom situation has much in common with forecasting the weather. Despite the fact that weather is controlled by well-known physical processes, it is virtually impossible to predict exactly what it will be doing more than a few days ahead. This is because it is impossible to detect all the influences which are at work on a particular weather system, and the influence of the factors which are missed builds up rapidly. As a result, two situations which may appear to be identical can develop in different directions. However, weather is not completely unpredictable; some types of weather system are more stable and predictable than others, and we can make overall predictions even if we cannot predict in fine detail. Thus we cannot predict whether it will rain or not on Midsummer Day two years hence, but we can be sure it will not freeze. (Technically, weather can be described by chaos theory (the mathematical variety)—chaos theory, in all its forms, is only too familiar to most teachers.)

In the same way, we cannot be sure that a given behavioural tactic will *invariably* be successful in the classroom; you may have missed what another member of the class was

doing previously; there may be school or home circumstances which influence pupils' reactions; you may in fact not be sending out the signals you think you are sending. However, it is most unlikely, for instance, that a flat, monotonous delivery will arouse the interest of an unenthusiastic class, or that a diffident approach will discipline them. The very fact that the signals we are dealing with have developed for purposes of communication means that most children will react to them in similar ways on the basis of their previous experience. In the same way, verbal commands will usually, but not always, have the expected effect. If you say 'Sit down' the class may not; however, they are more likely to than if you had said, 'Leave the room'.

Furthermore, non-verbal signals are more powerful in conveying feelings than speech because most recipients are less aware of them. If you overtly tell a class that the subject you are dealing with is really exciting, or that you intend to deal firmly with any indiscipline, the explicit message may give the more cynical members of the class a clear target to aim at. If you convey enthusiasm or firmness non-verbally, your audience extracts the message from your behaviour subliminally. Since they have derived the message themselves without being aware of having done so, they are less likely to be able to challenge it.

SUMMARY

The main text of the book is addressed to inexperienced teachers, with teacher trainers, especially at a school level, and other professionals who have similar communication problems as secondary audiences. The final chapter is primarily addressed to trainers. Though the book is research-based, its aim is practical training.

At the end of each chapter we will include exercises of two types. The first are for practitioners reading the book on their own; they are short exercises to test existing knowledge and what has been learnt from the chapter. The second set include descriptions of activity sequences which can be done independently or as a group and used as points for discussion. Most of these problems derive from crises which inexperienced teachers have reported to us; we suggest what might have gone wrong and possible ways in which the crisis could have been averted. We cannot guarantee that these suggestions will 'work' in a particular situation, but they have a high probability of doing so.

Chapter 1

Introduction

UP THE SWANEE?

The phrase 'The Blackboard Jungle' epitomises the frustrations, anxieties and cynicism of those involved in the stressful occupation of teaching. It aptly highlights the endless tangle of theoretical advice and pedagogical practice, populated with such strange creatures as reports, examinations, preparation, capitulation, attainment targets, folklore and headteachers. Little wonder, then, that many student and probationary teachers enter the jungle well-schooled in identifying the fauna and flora, but wondering why their training has not armed them with a practical 'machete' with which to cut a preliminary path.

One particularly painful and thorny tangle for many new teachers is classroom control. Deviant and disruptive behaviour can divert them away from their carefully planned teaching programme, maybe never to return. It is easy for any experienced teacher to recall their early days in the classroom when survival ranked high on the list of priorities, and when endless evenings were spent worrying neurotically about certain classes and pupils.

Solutions were hard to come by; every promising path ended abruptly in a seething morass, and the class showed a mulish tendency to bolt in every direction but the right one. As a new teacher, you are in a position of having to break in a creature which you cannot directly force to do your bidding and which can collectively outrun you, both literally and metaphorically. We therefore make no apology for concentrating, at the outset, on how you can detect, from the laid-back ears or rolling eye, the signs of trouble which need your immediate attention, as well as where a more soothing approach is required. Secondly, we look at the 'hands'; the skills which allow you to establish and maintain effective control and authority—unless you meet a bucking bronco of a class. A very small number of children and classes are uncontrollable, even by the sanctions available to an experienced teacher.

However, you need to go further, not only to catch and tether, but to persuade the mule to follow, to set up an environment in which authority and control become merely subsidiary. Though we have left the positive side of the classroom relationship to last, this is not a reflection of its relative unimportance—any more than our omission of anything related to the curriculum means it does not matter what teachers teach. Children have instrumental views of their teachers (e.g. Docking 1980, Nash 1974) they expect them to teach rather than to be friendly, and this expectation is likely to be increased with the National Curriculum.

Some may regret this lack of true friendship between teacher and class, but this phenomenon is not confined to the school. Among adults, friends are usually similar in age and status and friendships do not normally develop between work colleagues who

occupy markedly different positions in the hierarchy. You cannot be truly a friend to the children, simply because you are an adult, and therefore you cannot establish a relationship based on true reciprocity. Inevitably you define the relationship, if only because if you fail to fulfil the children's expectations, they may consider themselves released from the need to attend (Nash 1974). Nash found that if the teacher did not meet the children's expectations that she should control and teach them, they rebelled against her; these were norms from which she was not readily allowed to depart. 'Friendliness is something of a bonus' as Nash says, and he feels that novice teachers need to learn the rules the class expects.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to clear in arriving at an appropriate relationship lies in the very nature of most teachers. As a breed we tend to be sympathetic to the potential dangers and problems which can affect our charges, and we are usually intent upon establishing, as quickly as possible, an empathy from which we can cater for their individual needs. It is not surprising, therefore, that for so many years, teacher training courses should have concentrated on pupil-based methods. Courses in the sociology, psychology and philosophy of education have tended, most laudably, to place emphasis on the factors affecting pupil performance. Government departments and other bodies have made part of the basic student teacher vocabulary such expressions as 'equality of opportunity', 'special needs', 'moral danger' and 'core curricula'. No one is denying the immense importance of these factors or disputing their place within the training process, but you will not find yourself in a position where you have the power to influence school practice in response to these pastoral and curriculum needs for some period into your career. You are unlikely to get such influence until you have demonstrated effective classroom skills.

ALL THE CLASS A STAGE

Whole-class teaching is very different to most situations in the normal social environment for which everybody has extensively practised social skills. You need to accentuate some of your existing skills to deal with this situation, and to abandon others. In normal conversation, for example, most of us are skilled at detecting, from the relevant non-verbal signs, if we are boring our friends, and can shift the topic of conversation until we detect more interest; but you cannot allow the children the same freedom to dictate the curriculum.

In the last resort, teachers have no sanction which can cow a child into submission (given that he has not been suspended from the school!) and in an average-sized class you cannot physically stop a number of children who are determined to be disruptive. Ultimately you cannot force children to learn; you must persuade them that to attend to what you propose to teach them is preferable to any alternative activity. Your chances of doing so are much greater if you can present your material in an interesting way and when the class cooperate with you, reward them in a way which they appreciate.

Many readers may wonder why it is necessary to look at non-verbal behaviour in such detail. Does it really matter whether you stand with your hands on your hips, or lean back against your desk? As we hope to show, it does. Readers may also wonder whether these

aspects of performance are what teaching is all about. We would not wish to claim that they are, but research suggests that student teachers who were able to see their lessons as a performance which might be more or less successful managed better than those who were more completely and personally involved. Those who maintained a degree of detachment were more able to perform successfully. Selfknowledge, including awareness of one's non-verbal skills, leads to effective performance.

The success or failure of any lesson will hinge on the effective use of the communication skills at your disposal. These should form part of your authority, felt subjectively by your class as linking you to the structure of your school. It may seem odd that such skills are observed by pupils and are understood in the sense that they convey authority. Political speeches offer a parallel—some politicians are more effective speakers than others; a few are really charismatic. The ability to speak persuasively can make a major contribution to political success, but Atkinson (1984) has shown that it depends on remarkably simple techniques. Effective speakers tend to package their ideas in formats, such as contrasts and three-part lists ('Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few') which make it easy for an audience to predict when the speaker will finish making a point; they can then respond immediately. Speaker and audience then seem to be 'on the same wavelength' as each other. The natural assumption must then be that the speaker is particularly persuasive. In other words, the manner of delivery governs the response; because it is readily taken in, the audience will form their impression from the delivery, even if they remember little of the content.

Significantly, many of the signals used by politicians to coordinate an audience's response are conveyed not in the words spoken, but through the non-verbal 'back-up' given in the speaker's postural and facial cues, tone of voice and speech timing. Atkinson suggests that politicians have to use relatively simple techniques as this is the only way that the response of a large audience can be synchronised. Even so, speeches frequently misfire through faulty technique—if the audience cannot predict when to applaud, they either do not applaud at all, or only hesitantly, after an embarrassing silence. The speaker does not seem to be 'getting through'. Charismatic speakers often seem to be able to time their speech so that it overlaps with the audience's applause, but without the important points being drowned out; thus they appear to have to struggle to keep their audience's enthusiasm under control. Atkinson suggests that most interactions, involving smaller numbers, will be more complex, and this certainly seems to apply to teaching.

Formal or informal? And what about the subject?

The more informal the approach and the greater the part of the children in the smooth running of the lesson, the more subtle your classroom skills need to be to maintain their interest in tasks which some at least would not have chosen freely. In a generally formal school setting, as an inexperienced teacher you can derive considerable support from the structure of the school rules, provided that you make sure you know them thoroughly, and can conduct lessons which are effective even if your relationship with the class is rather cool and distant. In such a setting the pupils are equally aware of how, as teacher, you should show your authority; any shortfall on your behalf may be immediately perceived as a sign of weakness. 'Master teachers' in such schools, who are often highly

popular with their classes, have much warmer and more humorous relationships with their pupils. You can aspire to this desirable situation only as your skills improve; as we shall show, such relationships depend on the class's knowledge of the limits you will allow. Experienced teachers who move to a new school are sometimes surprised by the sudden need to put effort into controlling their classes; they are not always aware how much they previously relied on their thorough, but subliminal, knowledge of the formal and informal procedures of their old school, and their reputation among the children.

More progressive and informal school settings make the inexperienced teacher's task easier in some ways, because there is less of a 'them and us' atmosphere to set the children against you. You still need authority to convince them that your subject is worth attending to, and to get them to work steadily through the difficult or dull areas which are present in every subject. Where children expect warm and non-restrictive relationships with teachers, you must exercise your authority on a narrow borderline between coldness and over-familiarity. Every school contains difficult children; in dealing with these in the more informal situation you may have to rely more on your own authority, whereas in the more traditional establishment a framework of rules would provide more assistance. In fact our videotapes show that the real differences between classroom processes in progressive and traditional schools are less great than the apparent ones, simply because the children at schools tend to have more similar attitudes than their teachers. In a progressive school children may have no uniform, address the teachers by their first names and come in freely to choose their own seats in the classroom, but this does not mean they will treat you as a friend; in a formal school, uniform, lining up outside the classroom before going to designated seats, and addressing you as 'Sir' or 'Miss' are no guarantee of order—yet nor do they prevent warm relationships.



Figure 1.1 Six pupils occupying their positions during Ms. Discord's lesson. The seating arrangement was of their choosing and held its own significance

Just as the similarities between different schools arise because their children react to teachers in similar ways, so similar tactics apply across subject boundaries in the secondary school. When children move from History to Home Economics, they are still the same children, and the different subject matter does not mean a complete difference in the social relationship they have with their teachers. Children are generally unaware of the intellectual structure of the particular subject, as you understand it—this would require knowledge which they are still in the process of learning. You cannot rely on the appeal of your subject itself, or the lure of completing their understanding of a particular branch of knowledge, to appeal to any substantial number of your pupils. Some children, especially in the younger age-groups, will be keen to learn, whatever you do. The majority will learn if you make it emotionally rewarding—especially if the alternatives are unrewarding. Their learning depends on a satisfactory teacher/pupil relationship, which is likely to remain independent of and unconnected to specific subject structures.

Teachers usually see themselves as teachers of a particular subject, and often feel that it is only possible to learn useful lessons from other teachers of their own subject. Pupils are far more likely to be impressed by what is happening in your relationship with them than by the finer points of the subject. What is more, their like or dislike of you may powerfully affect their attitude to the subject, and indeed whether they continue or drop it when option choices become available.

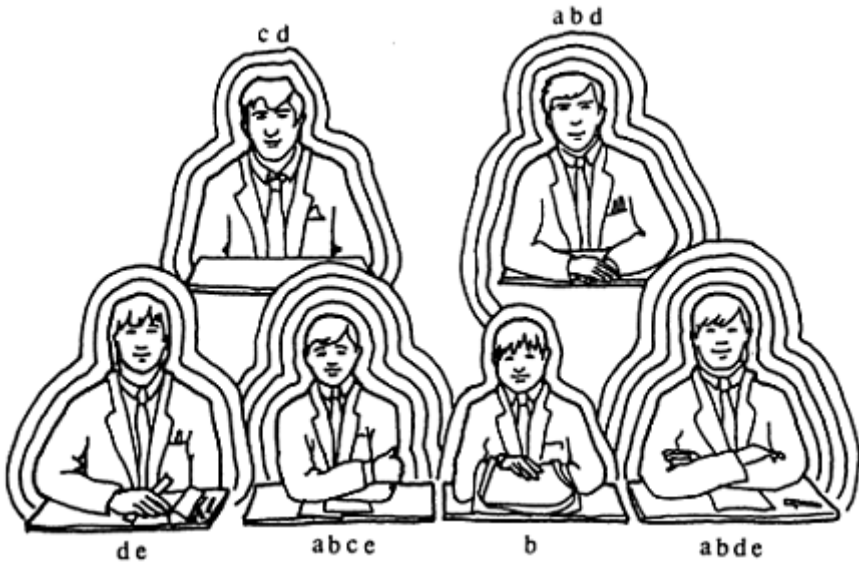


Figure 1.2 Shows the 'mitigators' affecting the pupils, each generally regarded as having potential for slowing or damaging pupils' educational progress:

a known family background conflicts

b reading age below 9:00