

Stepping out: transforming teaching with low threshold technology

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Abstract

To the actor, nonverbal communication is as important as their voice; the 'claiming' of the space in which they work is an integral part of a meaningful performance. In Michael Chekhov's seminal 'The Techniques of Acting' the rudiments of an actor's presence in a space are delineated and stimulated, via a series of exercises: for instance, walking across the entire space, and the touching of walls. In turn, in this uninhibited process, confidence and authority evolves. As teachers, how often do we 'claim' the space, other than that behind the lectern? Or concern ourselves with the way we communicate beyond the spoken word? This short paper reflects on an innocuous, 'low threshold' technology that has significant transformative power in the classroom.

Keywords

classroom delivery; classroom management; student behaviour; low threshold technology; presentation clickers

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Stepping out

To the actor, nonverbal communication is as important as their voice; the ‘claiming’ of the space in which they work is an integral part of a meaningful performance. In Michael Chekhov’s seminal *The Techniques of Acting* (1942, [1993]) the rudiments of an actor’s presence in a space are delineated, and stimulated via a series of exercises. For instance, walking across the entire space, and the touching and feeling of walls. In turn, in this uninhibited process, confidence and authority evolves. As teachers, how often do we ‘claim’ the space, other than that behind the lectern? Or concern ourselves with the way we communicate beyond the spoken word?

In two surveys we have administered at LJMU, on the role of technology in teaching, there’s a particular (and unheralded) piece of technology that is having a meaningful impact on the way we teach and construct the learning space. I’ll keep you on tenterhooks for a while and not name that technology, but here are some of the comments:

- *I love it! It really frees you up to move about and engage with people.*
- *I feel I connect more with students who sit in different places in the room more naturally.*
- *I find lectures difficult and lecture theatres the worst environment for my style of delivery and therefore this piece of kit greatly assists me in trying to achieve a greater connection with the students.*

What’s striking about the comments is that there is an appreciation of one’s movement, an appreciation of the space, and of the students within that space. Before reading on, it is important to stress that I am *not* advocating teachers to move around in the classroom all of the time – the way we teach is personal and develops over time. In this

short paper, I wish to draw attention to a few ideas as a means of illuminating how we may reflect on movement and nonverbal communication – all prompted by a seemingly run-of-the-mill piece of technology.



But first...

Picture the scene, a typical teaching space, rows of desks, a projector and screen, and a lectern with access to a computer. The lecturer may stand motionless behind the lectern, or move laterally in front of the screen. The main use of technology within this room is a simple click on a keyboard to advance the slides and, depending on the number of slides being presented, the lecturer must always return to the lectern to press that all important key. The movement is monotonous and predictable and, sometimes, awkward – often interrupting the flow of the talk.

And...

Who would have thought that the wireless PowerPoint presentation clicker could be so transformative? For that is the piece of technology that has excited some of our staff. These tools are ‘low threshold’ (Gilbert, ND) technologies – they are reliable, accessible, easy to use, non-intimidating and inexpensive.

In our study, all teaching staff at LJMU were invited to complete a form to request a wireless presentation clicker. Logitech R400 clickers were provided to interested colleagues, and 43 responded to an online survey (23 per cent of those who were provided with the tool). Whilst we were reaching out to the most enthusiastic teacher their comments were, nevertheless, anonymised. We attempted to get a glimpse into any effect on teaching practice, and identify any other possible benefits.

There is something unassuming about the presentation clicker (not to be confused with the other clicker – the ‘classroom [student] response system’). This technology encourages movement, enabling the teacher to pace up and down the room, and to each corner. It’s strange how this tool has been in operation for several years and, whilst there has been research in electronic voting devices or student response systems, in a standard trawl through Google Scholar and Scopus, I could not locate any specific research on these clickers. In the absence of such research, let’s speculate further on the technology’s affordances.

On the move...

When we think of movement, they can include large expansive ones or small ones, such as simple hand gestures. The traditional lectern has been designed in a way that inhibits or hides these small bodily hand movements and gestures. Many rooms are also fitted with lecterns integrated within presentation desks that house all manner of equipment. Sometimes the tiny gestures help add value to our communication. Consider these thoughts from David Alberts’ (1997: 3) *The Expressive Body*:

Communication through movement and gesture is an essential element of human interaction ... Because nonverbal behaviour works. It’s a quick, efficient and effective way to communicate. Physical behaviour represents our thoughts and feelings directly and instantaneously... Seldom, does our physical behaviour “say” things we don’t mean. Our actions might say things we don’t want to say, but they rarely express things we don’t feel.

Involuntary movements made as we speak back up our statements and, because they are involuntary, carry a different weight in terms of honesty and directness. In the educational literature, there is much on ‘physical performance’, such as: maintaining eye contact with students rather than fixing attention to notes or materials; having a relaxed posture; moving around while presenting. Research in the area of ‘teacher immediacy’, connect these actions with behaviours, such as openness, attentiveness, enthusiasm – and shows that the presence of the teacher can affect the student in many subtle ways. For instance, Burroughs (2007), Pogue and Ahyun (2006) and Valez and Cano (2008) posit that students feel prepared in taking direction, are likely to engage, and to work with one another with more ‘immediate’ teachers.

One of the staff comments related to engaging with students located in different places in a room: (“I feel I connect more with students who sit in different places in each room”). The seating position of students has been the focus of some interesting studies. One, in particular, by Pichierri and Guido (2016), examined whether student performance was affected as a function of their seating location. They note that there are personality differences among students – some are shy, some are nonconformist and react against group norms – and the decision to occupy a

particular row or position in a classroom could be dependent on some of these personality traits. Pichierra and Guido's five-year long study was administered to marketing students and, focusing on shyness, found that classroom seating arrangement significantly influenced student behaviour. They reflect, "Greater eye-contact with the teacher and, as a consequence, greater involvement that increases the learning process, might determine differences in performance according to seating position" (p. 440).

Managing classroom behaviour, or 'student incivility' has also been of increasing concern (Burke et al., 2013). These can range from constant, irritating 'annoyances' (Feldman, 2001), including learner attention distracted by personal devices (Knepp, 2012). Moving freely in the classroom enables the teacher to have significantly greater control of behaviour.

Conclusion

I am a creative artist. I have the ability to radiate. Lifting my arms above me, I soar above the earth. Lowering my arms, I continue to soar. In the air moving around my head and shoulders, I experience the power of thoughts. In the air moving around my chest, I experience the power of feelings. In the air moving around my legs and feet, I experience the power of will. I am that.

- Michael Chekhov

Chekhov, and those who followed him, helped formalise the methods through which actors understand their practice, improve their performance and perfect their artistic skills. Although teaching is different there is a similar need for us appreciate the nuances of communication and to claim the space for ourselves and our students.

The aim of this paper was to also show that technology comes in all shapes and sizes; some come with a multitude of bells and whistles. The presentation clicker might not be the device that springs immediately to mind when we think about enhanced learning with technology and, as a low threshold application, it is easy to overlook its potential. It is much more than the technology itself. In untethering the teacher from the lectern, its very use can stimulate us to think more positively and imaginatively about space, movement, classroom management and nonverbal communication.

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