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Understanding Proxemics through Restrooms: A “Hands-Off” Approach to Personal Space and Communication

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Abstract

Numerous methods of teaching nonverbal communication have been well documented in the literature. However, some instructors may struggle to create transformative learning experiences for their students. This teaching activity provides a creative and original way for students to discuss nonverbal communication, specifically proxemics, in a fun, engaging, and memorable learning experience. This exercise asks the learners to reflect upon a previous experience with using a public restroom, critically reflect upon that experience individually, engage in classroom discourse about the experience, and take action by being aware of the space and territoriality choices they make. Students have responded positively to the classroom discussions about the use of personal space, territoriality, and nature of nonverbal interactions within the restroom context.

Courses

Introduction to Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking, and Nonverbal Communication

Objectives

- 1) To expand students' perceptions of proxemics in nonverbal communication.
- 2) To increase students' understanding and awareness of personal space in daily communication.
- 3) To increase students' understanding of territoriality and self-reflection of personal responsiveness.

Introduction and Rationale

Nonverbal communication and its numerous facets are discussed in a variety of communication courses. When communicators understand the nonverbal axioms, they are able to engage their audience, judge the use of their personal space, and make appropriate spatial decisions within relationships. As Prabhu (2010) wrote, “the knowledge of the proxemic behavior becomes an indispensable field of study as it adds a wider approach to the study of nonverbal communication” (p. 9). As instructors develop instructional methods to teach nonverbal communication they

are required to make numerous choices in their pedagogical process. There are many instructional methodologies that can be utilized to transmit this content and engage students in an active learning environment. These instructional methods include traditional lecture, small group discussion, role playing, artifact analysis, and classroom exercises (Knapp, 1999). Having used many of the methodologies previously listed, I found that the students were often disconnected from the content and were unable to apply the theoretical concepts to their daily communication. Thus, I sought to develop a creative and original way for students to discuss nonverbal communication, specifically proxemics, in a fun, engaging, and memorable learning experience. In his comprehensive explanation on teaching nonverbal communication, Knapp (1999) explained “[nonverbal] exercises are designed to illustrate a point and provide a memorable learning experience, while at the same time keeping the focus on the substance, not the activity itself” (p. 195). As a result, I created a classroom exercise that invites students to discuss their perception of proxemics, their understanding and awareness of personal space, and their responsiveness to territoriality by examining the use of urinal and stall selection in male and female public restrooms. Bain (2004) suggested “When we encounter new material, we try to comprehend it in terms of something we think we already know” (p. 26). Although most individuals have made choices regarding their restroom behavior, they have not usually considered how culture, gender, and personal attributes influence proxemic choices.

The creation and development of this proxemics teaching exercise was guided by Mezirow’s psychocritical approach to learning. Mezirow (2000) described learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (p. 5). When students experience a change in their attitude, beliefs, or perceptions, transformative learning has occurred (Mezirow, 2000). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) described the four primary components of the transformative learning process as “experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action” (p. 134). This exercise asks the learners to reflect upon a previous experience with using a public restroom, critically reflect upon that experience individually, engage in classroom discourse about the experience, and take action by being aware of the space and territoriality choices they make.

Description of the Activity

Before completing this activity, students should have a general understanding of the definition of nonverbal communication and the axioms of nonverbal communication. This activity may be completed in 25 to 30 minutes of a standard 50-minute class. This activity requires a student handout featuring questions regarding the students’ perceptions of proxemics, personal space, and territoriality (see questions below). In addition, the activity requires four figures showing the bathroom urinals/stalls with different urinals/stalls occupied for each figure (see descriptions of figures below). Also, the debriefing questions connect the activity to the content and the student learning objectives.

Because most, if not all, individuals have utilized a public restroom during their life, the experience is easily established for this exercise. I begin by having the students respond individually to a series of questions which ask the students to critically reflect on the use of proxemics in their lives. The questions are:

1. What are examples of spatial arrangement, territoriality, and personal conversation distances, and what examples have you noticed in your daily communication?

2. What is your degree of intimate, personal, social, and public space? How does this change based on the type of communication encounter and the nature of the relationship you have with the person with whom you are communicating?
3. In what ways does the physical environment influence our nonverbal behavior and the communication choices we make regarding proxemics?

In order to establish a comfortable environment for classroom discourse, I have a few students share their reactions and reflect upon the introductory questions. However, if the class is rather large, students can work in smaller, collaborative learning groups.

Next, I move into the specific activity. I have traditionally used four different figures for this exercise; however, more could be utilized to expand the conversation. Each of the figures is described below. The figures can be recreated on a large piece of paper or drawn on the classroom board. Each figure illustrates six restroom stalls/urinals which are numbered one through six from left to right. To the right of the stalls/urinals is the restroom entrance. Figure one shows one individual occupying stall/urinal one. Figure two shows one individual occupying stall/urinal three and another individual occupying stall/urinal five. Figure three shows one individual occupying stall/urinal three and another individual occupying stall/urinal four. Figure four shows individuals occupying stall/urinal one, three, and five.

Instructors work their way through each individual figure, asking the students to identify which urinal they would select and why they made this choice based on the physical environment and context of the restroom. I allow the entire class to respond. However, an instructor may wish to break the students into small groups and have them respond within their groups. Based on nonverbal research that males and females differ in their nonverbal communication (Gamble & Gamble, 2013), I have the male and female students respond separately, which spurs a lively classroom dialogue.

Debriefing

The use of the discussion questions and figures prompts an exciting classroom discussion. Students connect their prior knowledge on nonverbal communication and proxemics to a humorous, yet practical, example of intimate, personal, social and public space. Once the students have completed the small group discussion, the instructor should pose the following questions to the class. The debriefing connects the instructional concepts and allows the students to be more reflective when making proxemics and territoriality choices.

1. Although the restroom provides us with an entertaining context to explore the use of proxemics, what other intimate situations might we encounter where consideration of spatial distance would be important?
2. Considering your perception of territoriality, how do you feel when someone invades your personal space?
3. Bearing in mind the influence of cultural background on nonverbal behavior, how will you respond to your territoriality and personal conversation distance preference when communicating in a diverse context?

Appraisal

Although this activity may appear to be a little unorthodox, the students respond positively to discussions about the use of personal space, territoriality, and nature of nonverbal interac-

tions within the restroom context. Because a majority, if not all, students have used a busy public restroom, they are able to relate directly to the experience and engage in meaningful dialogue about the choices they have made. The student discourse serves as a foundation for discussion about the use and understanding of nonverbal communication. Many students commented that they were often selective in their restroom choices but had not acknowledged how culture, gender, and personal attributes influenced those choices. As a result, the students leave the classroom with a broader appreciation and understanding of nonverbal communication and proxemics. Moreover, the lesson is meaningful and memorable, and many students have discussed the activity after the completion of the class through informal out-of-class conversations.

Some instructors may not feel comfortable discussing the use of urinal and stall selection with their students. A variation of this assignment might utilize the restroom sinks as a starting point for this dialogue. Previous classroom discussion has illustrated that students face the same challenges when selecting a sink as they do urinal or stall. This has been especially true for female students.

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