

Resource Guide

Increasing intention with non-content communication

Communication with students, whether speaking in class or communicating digitally, can be categorized into two broad categories:

1. Course content communication: focused specifically on the content you expect students to learn.
2. Non-content communication: expectations, procedures, motivation, the weather, etc.

Course objectives are tied directly to content, which may lead to prioritization of course content communication. Yet, in every class meeting, there are various communications that are not directly related to course content. Seidel et al. (2015) analyzed instructor communications in a biology course and found that, over the course of a semester, instances of non-content communication occurred in every class meeting. The main topic categories they observed were relationship building, classroom culture, explaining teaching choices, sharing of personal experiences, and clarifying of the nature of science.

Harrison et al. (2019) noted that these categories were primarily *positive* in tone and posited that *negative* non-content communication also exists. In observations of 61 courses, they found that 90% of non-content communication (or “instructor talk”) was positive, but 10% was negative in nature. A few examples of negative non-content communication categories include making public judgments about students, ignoring student challenges, assuming poor student behaviors, and intimidating students about the difficulty of the course. In a follow-up study, when asked what non-content communication affected their learning, student responses were disproportionately higher for instructor/student relationship related talk (i.e., relationship building or deconstructing; Ovid et al., 2021).

Using non-content communication to promote a positive learning environment

Non-content communication can take place in class and through digital means (e.g., Canvas). In a comparison of in person and online communication, 72.5% of students surveyed reported that online communications were equal to or more effective than face-to face non-content communication (Murray & Osterhage, 2024). Instructors who are hoping to add intention to their non-content communications, while ensuring positivity in communications, may consider starting with these areas -

- Discussion of course expectations and policies:
 - This is an opportunity to share “secrets for success” while clarifying expectations about how students should interact with course content. For instance, if planning to post lecture slides or recordings on Canvas, it might be necessary to clarify how to take notes as effectively as possible

in class. Positive communication will focus on the support structures and opportunities for interaction with the instructor to foster student learning. Negative communication in this area will focus more on expectations of student laziness, the “scary” reputation of the course, or other expectations and assumptions that might discourage students.

- Post-assessment feedback:
 - Positivity in feedback can help bolster student self-efficacy and improve learning by helping clarify how students should read and react to feedback. Negative forms of non-content communication related to feedback may include confirmation of expectations around poor-performance or sharing doubts about the student’s capabilities in the field more broadly.
- Demystifying the nature of your field
 - Positive communication about the nature of inquiry in any specific field may help students feel more comfortable about what they don’t know (e.g., the breadth of questions science can answer) while helping them understand the context of the course. Negative communication or presumptions (e.g., “you should know X by now) may create a negative learning environment.

Remember: non-content communication may be related to content but focuses on process or context rather than the facts of the content itself. Adding intention to these communications and recognizing areas where there might be communication with a negative bias can help create a learning environment that feels more supportive.

Resources

- Harrison, C. D., Nguyen, T. A., Seidel, S. B., Escobedo, A. M., Hartman, C., Lam, K., ... & Tanner, K. D. (2019). Investigating instructor talk in novel contexts: Widespread use, unexpected categories, and an emergent sampling strategy. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 18(3), <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.18-10-0215>
- Murray, C., & Osterhage, J. (2024). “They helped me through the semester”: electronic instructor messages can foster the instructor-student relationship. *Journal of Microbiology and Biology Education*, 25(1), <https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.00004-24>
- Ovid, D., Rice, M. M., Luna, J. V., Tabayoyong, K., Lajevardi, P., & Tanner, K. D. (2021). Investigating student perceptions of Instructor Talk: Alignment with researchers’ categorizations and

analysis of remembered language. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 20(4),

<https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.21-06-0153>

Seidel, S. B., Reggi, A. L., Schinske, J. N., Burrus, L. W., & Tanner, K. D. (2015). Beyond the biology: A systematic investigation of noncontent instructor talk in an introductory biology course. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 14(4), <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.15-03-0049>

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by [email](#).