TUTOR

Teachers' upskilling aiming at a holistic inclusivity in learning

Introduction to Inclusive education

Strand Seven: Interrogating your Practice

Reading Materials

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to Strand Seven, Interrogating your practice. It examines how educators communicate as well as looks back to inclusive environments and reflexivity and encourages you to use UDL and Anti-bias approaches to think about strategies and how to implement them. Communication is one of the central foundations for successful teaching and learning. It is much more than the mere exchange of information - it shapes social interaction, influences the learning atmosphere, and has a direct impact on the motivation and well-being of students. In addition to theoretical basics, this unit provides practical suggestions and reflection questions to help you become more aware of your own classroom communication and use it in a targeted manner to create a positive and respectful classroom.

0.7.1 Communication

Communication is a crucial basis for successful teaching and learning. This unit is about understanding communication not as a one-sided process, but as an interplay of different elements that shape our entire social interaction. In addition to verbal expressions, non-verbal aspects such as body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice play a key role.

These elements are not static - they change depending on the situation, interlocutor, and context. Educators who are aware of the impact of these factors can adapt their interactions with students in a targeted way. This allows for more inclusive, appreciative, and effective communication, which helps to make the classroom a positive and supportive learning space.

The role of body language in communication

Body language is a central form of non-verbal communication and has a considerable influence on how spoken content is perceived. While verbal language conveys information, body language adds emotional nuances to this content. **Educators' body language has a direct influence on the atmosphere in the classroom** and can promote or inhibit a supportive learning environment. Through open posture, smiles and welcoming gestures, educators can create an environment where students feel comfortable speaking up and taking intellectual risks. Positive body language can support a growth mindset by signalling that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. When educators are encouraging, students are more likely to actively participate in class and try out their own ideas. Body language can support communication, but it can also (unconsciously) make it more difficult.

When **body language reinforces verbal communication**, it helps messages to come across more clearly and convincingly. An open posture, such as standing relaxed with the shoulders back and direct eye contact with the students, signals interest and self-confidence. This can boost learners' confidence and encourage them to actively participate in the lesson. Specific gestures can also enrich verbal communication by visualizing content and directing the students' focus. For example, pointing to a specific element on the board or nodding in support of a correct answer can facilitate understanding and increase the attention of the class. Even the smallest non-verbal cues, such as a raised eyebrow or an appreciative smile, can help students feel heard and valued.

However, body language can also undermine communication if it unconsciously sends negative signals. Crossed arms, averted eyes or a rigid posture can appear distant or dismissive and reduce openness to interaction. If an educator avoids eye contact, this could be

4

interpreted by students as a lack of interest or uncertainty, which reduces their motivation to participate in lessons. It becomes particularly problematic when verbal and non-verbal signals do not match. For example, if an educator speaks encouraging words but adopts a closed posture, this can appear contradictory and raise doubts about the sincerity of the message. Such inconsistent signals, also known as mixed messages, can lead to misunderstandings and reduce the effectiveness of communication.

A conscious use of body language can therefore help to create a positive learning environment, motivate students, and avoid misunderstandings. Educators who reflect on their own non-verbal communication and use it in a targeted manner can not only convey their messages more clearly but also promote a supportive and trusting learning environment.

Cultural and contextual considerations on body language

The meaning of body language is by no means universal but varies greatly between diverse cultures and contexts. Educators should also be sensitive to this, especially in multicultural classrooms.

In some cultures, for example, direct eye contact is seen as a sign of respect and attention, while in others it can be perceived as challenging or inappropriate. Similarly, gestures such as nodding or shaking your head can have different meanings depending on your cultural background. Educators should be aware of how their body language is interpreted by students with diverse cultural backgrounds. This does not mean that they must completely adapt their body language, but rather that they develop a reflective sensitivity to different perceptions. It may also be useful to work on this transparently in class.

One example of context-dependent body language in the school context is the use of proximity and distance in different teaching situations. The same body language gesture - approaching students - can therefore be perceived as either supportive or monitoring and stress-inducing, depending on the situation. In an open, discussion-based form of teaching, for example in a seminar or a group work phase, it can be helpful for the educator to move freely in the room, communicate with the students at eye level and sit down with them as the situation requires. This body language signals accessibility and interest, which encourages students to actively participate in the discussion. In an exam situation, on the other hand, the same closeness can be perceived as uncomfortable. If an educator repeatedly stands close to a student or looks over their shoulder during a test, this can be perceived as controlling

5

behaviour that increases stress and insecurity. In this context, it is often more appropriate to take a neutral position in the room to show a calming yet attentive presence.

Educators must be able to **react flexibly and sensitively to different interpretations of body language.** This includes not only consciously controlling their own non-verbal signals, but also attentively perceiving the body language of their students. For example, a slouched sitting posture, lowered shoulders, or evasive eye contact can indicate that a student is withdrawing, feeling insecure or losing interest. In such cases, Educators can create a more active presence by deliberately changing their position in the room, for example by moving closer to the person concerned or varying the physical distance to the entire group to create new dynamics. Similarly, broader gestures - such as open arm movements, pointing more clearly to relevant content or inviting hand movements - can help to draw attention and involve students more. Activating postures can also signal that the educator is actively listening and showing interest in the students' contributions. Conscious non-verbal communication can not only positively influence moods and dynamics in the classroom but also strengthen students' confidence in their own participation. This promotes a learning environment in which everyone feels seen and taken seriously.

In addition**, students often mirror the body language of their educators**. If an educator is enthusiastic and open, this attitude rubs off on the class and contributes to an interactive and engaging learning environment. Conversely, closed, or stressed body language can lead to insecurity and encourage a more passive or distant attitude among students.

6

Educators' body language has a direct impact on the atmosphere in the classroom and can promote or inhibit a supportive learning environment. Through open posture, smiles and welcoming gestures, educators can create an environment where students feel comfortable speaking up and taking intellectual risks. Positive body language can support a growth mindset by signalling that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. When educators are encouraging, students are more likely to actively participate in class and try out their own ideas.

A conscious use of body language can help to build strong and trusting relationships between educators and students in the long term. When educators regularly send positive non-verbal signals - for example through affirmative gestures, friendly facial expressions, or an open attitude - this conveys reliability and support. Such a relationship of trust is essential for students' learning success and motivation. It can also help to reduce disciplinary problems, as students are more likely to feel respected and valued.

As well as building trust, body language can also be used to defuse difficult situations in the classroom. A calm and controlled posture can have a de-escalating effect when tensions arise. Small non-verbal gestures, such as an encouraging smile or a subtle thumbs up, can signal to students that they are on the right track without verbally emphasizing or pressuring them. This can be particularly helpful for students who struggle with insecurities or find it difficult to actively participate in class.

Body language is therefore a powerful tool that goes far beyond the spoken word. Educators who consciously reflect on their non-verbal communication and use it in a targeted way can not only convey their messages more clearly, but also create a supportive, respectful, and inclusive learning environment.

Understanding facial expressions

Facial expressions are another component of non-verbal communication and are intricately linked to body language. While posture, gestures and movements express body language, facial expressions complement these signals with subtle facial expressions that precisely convey emotions, moods, and reactions.

Like body language**, facial expressions also influence how verbal messages are perceived**. When facial expressions and spoken words match, communication comes across as coherent and convincing. Educators who consciously match their facial expressions to their verbal statements convey sincerity and interest, which strengthens students' confidence. This consistency creates a sense of reliability and ensures that students are more likely to engage with the content as they perceive the educator as authentic and supportive. Conversely, a discrepancy between facial expressions and language - such as encouraging praise accompanied by a distant facial expression - can lead to uncertainty and weaken the impact of communication. Just like inappropriate body language, careless facial expressions can unintentionally signal rejection, disinterest or severity and thus impair the classroom climate.

However, **facial expressions can only be consciously controlled to a limited extent**. Many facial expressions are unconscious, reflex reactions to emotions and arise automatically, controlled by neurological processes in the limbic system. Spontaneous reactions such as surprise, joy or irritation are difficult to control, which is particularly important in challenging teaching situations. Nevertheless, educators can use their facial expressions consciously to a certain extent by first getting to know their own facial expressions better through self-observation, feedback from colleagues or video recordings. By using facial expressions in a reflective and situationally appropriate way, educators can make their communication more

Kofinanziert von der
Europäischen Union

effective. It is not about developing "perfect" facial expressions, but about promoting coherent non-verbal communication and avoiding misunderstandings.

In difficult or emotionally charged situations, a compassionate facial expression can show that the educator takes the students' concerns seriously. This makes it easier for learners to open up and promotes a culture of mutual respect and trust. Neutral and benevolent facial expressions can also help to de-escalate conflicts and convey difficult feedback respectfully.

The **interpretation of facial expressions is heavily dependent on cultural influences** and can have different meanings depending on the social context. While an attentive frown is seen as a sign of concentration and serious thought in some cultures, it can be interpreted as scepticism or rejection in others. Similarly, raising the eyebrows can signal interest or surprise in some regions, while elsewhere it is perceived as an expression of disapproval or impatience. As many facial signals are interpreted instinctively, teachers can unintentionally create false impressions, especially if they are not aware of the cultural diversity in their classroom. Reflectively and flexibly adapting to different communication styles - for example by carefully observing the reactions of their students - helps to avoid misunderstandings and create an inclusive learning environment in which everyone feels valued and respected.

8

Educators can therefore be interculturally sensitive by recognizing the different meanings of facial expressions. For example, care can be taken to ensure that a reserved facial expression is not automatically interpreted as disinterest or that a smile does not always mean approval. This has the advantage that students are not disadvantaged or misunderstood due to cultural differences. At the same time, however, opportunities should also be created to talk about cultural differences in non-verbal communication and to convey the "facial expression conventions" of the country to give them social and professional orientation. For example, for students from a background where direct eye contact with authority figures is considered disrespectful, it could be a valuable orientation to learn that in some countries this is seen as a sign of self-confidence and respect. The same of course applies to body language.

The influence of tone of voice

The voice is an often underestimated but essential element of communication in education. The tone of voice can influence how messages are perceived whether they have a supportive or distancing effect and to what extent they shape the relationship between educators and students. A conscious use of tone of voice can help to create a supportive classroom atmosphere, avoid misunderstandings, and increase learner engagement.

How something is said is often just as important as the actual content of the message. The tone of voice influences whether a statement is perceived as friendly or dismissive, motivating or discouraging. **Even small adjustments such as a slightly lowered volume to emphasize a key point or a deliberate raising of the voice to show enthusiasm can significantly increase the impact of the message**. A warm and attentive voice can convey interest and support, while a sharp or monotone can be off-putting. If tone of voice and content do not match - for example, if an encouraging statement is delivered in an irritated or impatient tone - this can lead to uncertainty or demotivation. By varying the tone of voice, educators can specifically control the students' understanding and emotional involvement. A slow, emphasized way of speaking is suitable for new content, for example, while a livelier tone can stimulate discussion.

The tone of voice also contributes to the atmosphere in the classroom. A friendly, motivating tone of voice can build trust and encourage open communication so that students feel encouraged to ask questions or actively participate in discussions. A harsh or derogatory tone, on the other hand, can cause anxiety and insecurity, which has a negative impact on participation and learning efficiency. Especially in tense situations, educators can have a de-escalating effect by consciously modulating their voice - a calm, gentle tone can help to ease tensions, while a clear, firm tone creates a structured and safe learning environment. A targeted tone of voice can not only increase attention but also create a supportive environment in which students feel comfortable and confident to explore new concepts.

A respectful and empathetic tone of voice is one of the foundations for building a trusting relationship between educators and students. These relationships are essential for learning success as they convey a sense of belonging and appreciation. Educators who signal interest and respect through their tone of voice create a classroom community in which students feel taken seriously and are more motivated to actively participate in class. A conscious use of tone of voice can also influence unconscious hierarchies in the classroom: While a distant, formal voice emphasizes authority, a warm, varied voice can promote a sense of cooperation and openness.

Flexibly adapting the tone of voice to different teaching situations supports clear and effective communication. While a calm, reassuring tone can have a de-escalating effect in stressful situations, a firm, definite tone is particularly effective when enforcing rules or a lively, enthusiastic tone for motivation. The tone of voice can be controlled in a targeted manner using even small means: a change in volume or tempo can reinforce or defuse a message,

while a targeted emphasis on key words helps to emphasize central content. The ability to consciously use tone of voice helps educators to radiate both authority and openness and to promote a classroom culture in which all students feel noticed and respected.

The power of words

Words are more than just signs - they convey meaning, influence perceptions and shape our behaviour. In a school context, for example, they can convey a sense of belonging and self-efficacy or reinforce exclusion and insecurity. The language that educators use in the classroom has a direct influence on whether students feel valued and encouraged or overlooked and discouraged. Consciously used language can create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that not only promotes individual development but also strengthens social interaction.

The way we speak shapes how we perceive others and ourselves. Educators who use appreciative, differentiated, and inclusive language help to ensure that students feel perceived as individuals and are not reduced to stereotypes. A conscious choice of words can have a positive influence on self-image, strengthen motivation to learn and reduce anxiety. On the other hand, thoughtless or unconsidered language can demotivate students, unintentionally place them in certain categories and reduce their sense of belonging.

10

Educators can encourage their students' self-confidence and motivation through targeted positive reinforcement. Appreciative feedback such as "I can see how hard you tried" or "That was a creative solution" motivates them to take on challenges and develop further. It is important that such encouragement is distributed evenly and consciously to all students so that no one feels left out. Unbalanced feedback - for example, if only a certain group is regularly praised while others receive hardly any recognition - can have the opposite effect and unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities.

Language can also help to promote resilience. When educators use phrases such as "mistakes are part of the learning process" or "everyone has a difficult day - the important thing is that you keep going", they help their students to develop a growth mindset. Instead of perceiving failures as fixed limits to their own abilities, students learn to see setbacks as learning opportunities and to face new challenges.

Just as words can empower, they also have the power to exclude and hurt. Language that reduces students to certain deficits or implicitly signals lower expectations of certain groups can have a lasting impact on their self-image and motivation. Sentences such as "That's

difficult for you, isn't it?" can unintentionally convey the feeling of not being taken seriously or being underestimated.

Inclusive language use means making all students feel that their identities and experiences are valued. This starts with simple but meaningful gestures, such as pronouncing names correctly or consciously avoiding assumptions about origin, gender, or social backgrounds. When educators choose language that recognizes and respects diversity, it creates an environment where all students feel welcome and seen.

Sometimes conscious reflection on language is dismissed as mere "political correctness", but it is about creating a learning environment in which everyone feels heard and respected. Educators who use language purposefully to empower all students not only promote their individual well-being, but also their willingness to learn and social interaction. Respectful and appreciative language use leads to greater engagement, stronger learning performance and a more positive classroom community in the long term.

The words educators choose to have a profound impact on the learning environment, motivation, and development of their students. Language can shape perceptions, influence behaviour and either open doors or create barriers. A conscious use of words creates a supportive and inclusive classroom environment that enables all students to reach their potential. By using language as a tool of reinforcement and encouragement, educators help to create a more equitable education system and support their students on their individual learning journey in the best possible way.

11

Reflection questions for educators:

- How does your non-verbal communication (body language, facial expressions, tone of voice) influence the atmosphere in your classroom?

  → Reflect on the situations in which your body language or tone of voice had a positive or negative influence on the students' engagement.

- How consciously do you use facial expressions in class and to what extent could they cause unintentional misunderstandings?

  → Think about how cultural differences or individual interpretations could influence your mimic communication.

- What role does your tone of voice play in the motivation and well-being of your students?

  → Analyse how different pitches and ways of speaking influence the willingness to learn and the dynamics in your class.

- How consciously do you choose your words in class to empower all students and not unintentionally exclude anyone?

  → Think about phrases that you use frequently and check whether they are conducive to an inclusive learning environment.

- How can you specifically reflect on and improve your own communication to create a supportive and respectful learning environment?

  → Develop strategies to use your verbal and non-verbal communication more consciously and adapt it if necessary.

12

References

Heritage, J., & Robinson, J. D. (2006). *The structure of patients' presenting concerns: physicians' opening questions.* Health communication, 19(2), 89-102. https://doi.org/ DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.12.004

Tannen, D. (1993). *Gender and conversational interaction*. Oxford University Press.

Hall, Judith A. and Knapp, Mark L. (2013). *Nonverbal Communication*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110238150

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1978). *A simplest systematics for the organization of turn taking for conversation.* In: Studies in the organization of conversational interaction (pp. 7-55). Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-623550-0.50008-2.

Cameron, D. (2001). *Working with spoken discourse*. SAGE Publications.

Gee, J. P. (2014). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. Hoboken.

0.7.2 Strategies and their implementation

Introduction

This unit will focus on how you can begin to think about implementing strategies for inclusive education in your practice, in your classroom, and within the educational institution in which you work. Identifying and implementing strategies begins with yourself as an educator and using a combination of reflexivity and reflecting to interrogate yourself. This is followed by identifying your communication techniques and strategies, teaching or facilitation strategies and using Universal Design for Learning, and Anit-bias approach to interrogate your classroom, practice, and curriculum. Finally, using a combination of Anti-bias type audits and reflections to interrogate the wider educational institution.

Starting with yourself:

- Start a journal to engage in reflexivity to interrogate what beliefs, values, biases, stereotypes etc. that you hold. Try to understand how you may have come to hold them – what in your systems helped to shape these value systems and assumptions? Thinking reflexively about who you are and the values you hold as you step into a classroom or create lessons and resources should be an ongoing process.
- Reflect on your practice frequently. Use a diary to record how your teaching went regularly. If you can get feedback from colleagues or students use that to inform yourself. Interrogate your reflections to consider if you were inclusive or were there any barriers or disabling practices for any of your students.

Communication techniques and teaching strategies:

- How do you introduce yourself to your students? Do you use pronouns, let them know how to pronounce your name? Do you tell them how to contact you?
- Consider your communication strategies – perhaps get a colleague to observe you and give feedback on communication styles, body language etc.
- Do you facilitate conversations, prompt critical thinking, or dictate lessons and readings? Do you use a combination of strategies that is inclusive of all learning?
- Find out about your students before you have them and then ask them about themselves. How do you pronounce their name? What are their pronouns? Keeping in mind that some students may not want to tell you – especially if they are meeting you for the first time.
- Work with a team of educators to interrogate the inclusiveness of each other's teaching, resources, and communication styles.

Curriculum, resources, and teaching / classroom environment:

- Examine the curriculum you use – what type of people are represented? What language is used? Are there any gaps in inclusion? Reflect on how it could be more inclusive. This could be carried out at the start, middle, and end of each teaching year.

- Interrogate your resources – what do people look like, sound like, act like, dress like etc. in the resources you use. Are your resources diverse – are they reflective of the people in your classroom?
- How have you set up your environment? Is it a traditional classroom set up with a teacher at the top and rows of students? Is it a circle to encourage face to face conversations?
- Do your resources meet UDL guidelines? Are they accessible?
- Ask colleagues to act as a critical friend and engage in an anti-bias audit of your resources and give you feedback.
- Ask your students to fill out an anonymous feedback sheet about the inclusiveness within your resources, teaching, and classroom environment. Ask for suggestions for improvement and apply them the following year.
- Keep a diary of the processes that you engage in and reflect on them regularly.

Wider Educational Institution

- Come together as a team and conduct an audit of the wider educational environment using UDL and anti-bias approaches.
- Create a tool and use it regularly, incorporating feedback and suggestions from students, parents, families, educators, leadership, and the wider community.
- Do not forget to examine policies and procedures for inclusivity.
- Source and engage in a community of practice – invite educators from other institutions to come to your and carry out an inclusive audit and provide peer feedback.

14

Conclusion:

Any inclusive strategies must start with interrogating yourself as a person to know what you 'carry in' to the classroom with you. Once you have engaged and are aware, then you can begin to examine your practice, your resources, environment, and the wider environment. It is important to engage in interrogation regularly and keep notes/reflections. These will help you to document the journey and evidence how inclusive education changes over time.

Consider:

1. What are the barriers to engaging in the types of interrogation as described in this unit?
2. How would you be able to overcome these barriers?
3. Can you think of other strategies to interrogate your practice, communication, and environment for inclusivity in education?