

ARE YOU A CREDIBLE TEACHER?

Becoming a Great Communicator

Recently I polled a small group of upper-division college students to determine what characterizes the credible teacher.

"Think about some of the most credible teachers you've had in college," I said. "What was special about them?"

These were a dozen sharp students, accustomed to doing well in a variety of courses offered by an array of teachers of both genders.

"Credible teachers," they told me right off, "know their stuff." They added: "The most credible teachers present their lectures in a coherent fashion."¹

These students were right on target. Much of the research on credible presenters agrees with their impressions.

I would like to set out briefly some major attributes of credible classroom presenters as supported by empirical studies. And then we'll look at the implications of those findings.

Before I do so, I must admit to my own bias toward the value of communication. This bias matches an array of findings from credibility studies. Credible teachers are, in fact, *competent communicators*.

But what *is* credibility? We're accustomed to applying the term to the political realm because we've seen such glaring and shameful lapses in this area. But on what basis do

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The use of an overhead projector helps speaker credibility.

we judge a person's credibility?

Research points to three dimensions. The credible person is (1) competent, (2) trustworthy, and (3) attractive.² Competent presenters are seen as intelligent, knowledgeable, and respected.

Trustworthy presenters are seen as fair and objective. They admit to not having all the answers, and their words and behaviors match.

Attractive presenters are viewed as composed, warm, vital, and dynamic. They like their audiences. (In fact, in one recent study, if presenters demonstrated *an expressed liking* for the audience, those audiences were more likely to alter their attitudes in ways advocated by the presenters.)³

Here, then, are some major characteristics of the credible teacher.

Credibility and Supporting Materials

Is there a link between credibility and using data and supporting materials in a presentation?

The research says there is. Several studies, for example, have concluded that speakers' credibility is enhanced when they use data to support their claims.⁴

This is especially true for speakers regarded by their audience as having poor to moderate credibility. It's much less the case if the presenter is already perceived as credible. In fact,

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studies show that a highly credible speaker does not necessarily enhance his or her credibility by including supportive materials in a presentation.⁵

As a bonus, however, messages that include evidence help later to inhibit or at least diminish counter persuasion (that is, messages that attempt to influence the audience to take a position *contrary* to the one originally advocated).⁶

Credibility and Fear Appeals

Should fear or threats have a place in the teaching process? A number of studies have generated some useful perspectives.

A highly credible teacher will find that the use of fear can be fairly effective. Appeals to fear, however, are not very influential, according to research, when they come from a person of low credibility.⁷

Responses to fear appeals may also be tied to receivers' self-esteem. One study concluded that persons with high self-esteem were more influenced by high-threat communication, while persons with low self-esteem were influenced by low-threat communication.⁸

Further, the data show that appeals to fear are not very effective when directed toward matters considered inconsequential by the receiver.⁹

When students, for instance, hear a teacher state that a late paper will be discounted five percent, that threat may have little effect on how promptly students meet

*“Credible teachers,
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“know their stuff.”*

the deadline. If the paper will be discounted 35 percent, the students are much more likely to be prompt.

Obviously, then, appeals to fear, if used at all, should come from a credible source and deal with appropriate and consequential matters.

Credibility and Two-Sided Issues

Presenters, and thus teachers, are seen as fair-minded and trustworthy when they offer several sides of an issue, contrasted with presenting only one side.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, listeners who receive a multi-sided message have been found to resist later negative persuasion.¹¹

This has some clear implications. Those who teach in life and social sciences, for example, inevitably face controversial issues. Genetic engineering and the age of the earth are only two. We could expect that students will place more trust in teachers (and their positions on issues) if they deal openly and

fairly with a variety of views.

Credibility and Visual Aids

Does using visual aids make a speaker more influential? A host of studies supports this conclusion.¹²

Recently the Wharton Applied Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania conducted research on the effect of overhead visuals on group decision-making. The study, commissioned by 3M, produced some rather dramatic results.

When overhead transparencies *advocated* the introduction of a new product, 67 percent of the groups studied favored that position. When overheads advised *against* introducing a new product, again 67 percent of the groups studied agreed with that position.

In every case, when overheads were used, the report concluded that “decisions were reached faster; meetings were shorter.”¹³

Credibility and Humor

Does using humor enhance a speaker's credibility? Humor has not been easy to study. Something so spontaneous and natural doesn't easily submit itself to controls. But limited research on humor has concluded that humor enhances the effectiveness of presenters with low credibility, but is less effective for highly credible sources.

In several instances, humor has been shown to increase student retention and recall.¹⁴ And one study even indicated that students who initially opposed a position changed to a slightly more positive position when exposed to humor in a classroom lecture.¹⁵

Humor, used sparingly and in good taste, can even be mildly self-deprecating and yet not negatively affect the source, particularly if he or she has high credibility.¹⁶ Research, finally, shows that appropriate humor helps capture and sustain interest in virtually every setting.¹⁷

Credibility and Organization

Researchers studying the effect of one's speech organization on credibility have found, predictably, a positive correlation.

Those studies generally conclude that well-organized messages, particularly from a moderately reliable source, increase credibility. Clear organization is

less crucial, however, for a speaker already perceived as credible.¹⁸

A further finding corroborates what speech instructors have taught for years: Major messages should appear both first and last in a presentation, since this helps them to be retained better.¹⁹

Credibility and Delivery

Researchers have focused considerable attention on whether certain delivery components enhance credibility. Those studies have spanned several decades and have produced some predictable outcomes.

One finding is this: As the presenter decreases his or her vocal force and pitch, credibility also decreases. Put more positively, credibility seems to increase when presenters vary their speech patterns.²⁰

A second research finding: When speakers use a conversational style, they are seen as more trustworthy. However, their dynamism suffers.²¹

What is a conversational style?

Typically it includes short sentences, personal pronouns, and contractions. But conversationality also includes an informal vocal tone that implies that the presenter and the student are engaged in an *animated conversation*.

Appearance, too, has received a great deal of scrutiny. The results seem consistently to indicate that clothing appropriate to the setting increases speaker credibility.²²

Conclusion

This brief review of some of the credibility literature has of necessity been incomplete. Additional studies conclude that virtually all good communication practices help produce higher credibility for the presenter, and thus almost certainly for the teacher as well.

Perhaps Aristotle had teachers in mind when he advised all speakers to include these three components in their presentations: *Pathos*—putting strong feeling and caring into your lecturing; *logos*—putting evidence and clear reasoning into your lecturing; and *etbos*—putting competence, trustworthiness, and student rapport into your lecturing.

Perhaps we could offer a text as a conclusion: It comes from 1 Persuasion 1:1: “The student who sitteth at your feet shall call you excellent when these three things abideth in your teaching:

Credible teachers are, in fact, competent communicators.

Worthwhile content, content clearly organized, and content uttered in compelling fashion. When you achieve these three, you shall be exceedingly credible, abundantly believed, and sooner than you might have believed, richly rewarded.” ☞

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